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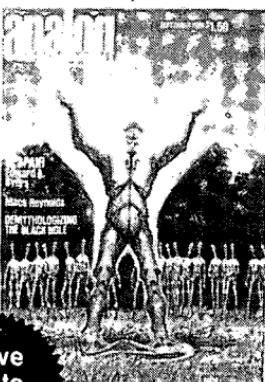
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Alfred

Hitchcock's Anthology

VOLUME 8



Edited by ELEANOR SULLIVAN

DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 LEXINGTON AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

FIRST PRINTING

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 76-43201

Printed in the U. S. A.

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Introduction

If you've designed a motion picture correctly in terms of emotional impact, Alfred Hitchcock once said, the Japanese audience should scream at the same time as the Indian audience: By the same token, if a mystery story is written correctly, every reader will react as its author intended in a given place in the story.

What makes our teeth chatter? A freezing day? Something more ominous? A wintry reception? A bitter glance? An icy atmosphere? A cold-blooded act? The chill of cold metal? A raw, cutting edge? A grave, watery or otherwise?

Perhaps it's unfair to publish this new Alfred Hitchcock anthology in the dead of winter, but that is where the unfairness ends. The tales in the collection all meet the shiverous standards readers have come to expect from the Master of Suspense.



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Black Disaster

by Richard O. Lewis

They came plodding up the hill, singly and in groups, their bobbing lights turning the snow to yellow in the pre-dawn darkness, their bodies casting long, wide shadows behind them. Some, their bodies black blobs against the snow, had not bothered to light their lights, for they were creatures of darkness and needed little light to guide them.

As usual, Mike Kovchec was among the first to arrive at the steamy mouth of the slope that led down at a steep angle into the maw of the black pit. Other early arrivals were loading themselves into a string of small cars that, at a signal to the engineer, would whisk them down to the bottom in a matter of seconds. They were talking and laughing, making ribald jokes.

Mike did not join them. Alone, he began picking his way down the slag-strewn slope, the carbide light at the front of his cap casting a yellow nimbus ahead of him and glinting occasionally from the twin pairs of narrow-gauge tracks along which cars would soon be shuttling up and down between the bottom of the mine and the top of the tall tipple.

He was a short, heavy man, somewhat shy and slow to make acquaintances. Although his hair was black, his face was a contrasting white, for his face never felt the rays of the sun through the long wintry months unless the sun chose to shine down through the smoke-filled sky on Sundays—which it seldom did. He was not unfriendly; it was just that he sometimes found difficulty in expressing himself and in understanding the rough talk and crude jokes of the others.

He did not miss companionship. He liked being alone with his thoughts, even as now, for his thoughts were generally pleasing to him. There was a tuneless whistle upon his lips as he trudged along, the blackness ahead of him retreating steadily before his light. Andy, his son, would be proud of him, just wait and see! Andy should go to high school next year, become educated! In this great new world anything was pos-

sible! Andy would wear a white collar, never work in the mines! Not that mining was not an honest job, but there were dangers . . .

Mike leaped quickly away from the rails to flatten himself against the ribbing of rough boards that held back the earthen sides of the tunnel as a distant rumbling reached his ears. The rumbling became a sudden roar as a string of cars came hurtling down, the men in them crouched low to keep their heads clear of the flashing roof beams, their lights flickering and guttering in the rush of air. Mike heard words shouted at him as cars clattered by, but the noise of iron wheels upon iron rails and the swish of air made them nearly unintelligible. He caught but one of them: "Squarehead!"

That would be Joe Spore or son. Neither missed a chance to ridicule him in some way before the other miners. He hoped he would not have trouble with them again today. They were greedy and quarrelsome, and could easily become dangerous.

Stepping away from the ribbing, Mike continued down the slope, careful to avoid the tail rope of jagged, frayed steel that lashed and writhed between the rails in the wake of the descending car. A single lash from that thin serpent could shatter an ankle beyond repair; and he must avoid injury at all cost, must not be laid off from work, not now. Schooling would take money—books, new clothing, things like that—and he must stand proud in Andy's eyes . . .

The string of cars, now empty, came roaring up. Seconds later, a loaded string went thundering and clattering down the other pair of tracks.

The sloping tunnel widened suddenly to become the flat, cavernlike bottom of the mine. Twin rails branched out in various directions among the black, oaken props that held the slate roof in place, each pair of rails finally becoming lost in the shadowy mouth of an entry.

Here, the full scent of the mine greeted Mike's nostrils—minute particles of coal dust in suspension, damp mustiness of mildewed props, ripe with decay, a miasma of smashed forest that had flourished live and green eons before the memory of man. It was a heady odor, an opiate. Some claimed that once the scent of the mine had clutched a man's senses, it held him prisoner to the black tunnels for the rest of his working days.

Chin thrust forward, head bent low to avoid the low roof, hands clasped behind him in typical coal-miner's crouch, Mike followed one of the tracks into the wide mouth of the mule barn that had been cut into the side of one entry. Here, the scent of the mine was compounded by the odor of

mule droppings and of moldy corn and hay; pungent, but not offensive.

Mike entered the second stall and let a hand run lightly over the neck of the small, black mule there. "Hi, Molly," he said, rubbing the hollows behind ears that had been worn to stubs by their continual contact with low roofs. Molly turned her head toward him in greeting, then quickly turned away again. Her eyes had not seen the light of day since the end of summer in some nearly forgotten pasture, and the glow from Mike's light tended to be blinding.

Mike unsnapped her halter rope and led her from the stall. "Steady, girl," he said, and Molly stood obediently, head bowed, while he took the padded collar from its peg, strapped it about her neck, and crossed the leather tugs over her back to keep them from dragging through the muck.

"We go to work, Molly," he said, picking up the hickory butt-stick with its tail chain and hook.

Molly needed no further instruction. She followed the pair of rails out of the barn, placing her feet daintily in the worn hollows between the ties, and stopped at the parting where the pit boss waited amid strings of empties.

One of the chores of the pit boss was to make certain that every miner got his just share of cars to load each day, no more, no less, no partiality shown. He held up six fingers in front of his light.

Mike nodded, went to the sixth car in one of the strings, and pulled its end coupling. Then he took the tugs from Molly's back, snapped them to each end of the butt-stick, and dropped the hook into the coupling slot of the lead car.

"Hi-yup!" he commanded, placing his right foot upon the narrow bumper of the car and hooking his elbow over the splintery boards of its front. Then, as Molly strained forward to bring the tail chain taut, he slid his left foot out along it for support, crouched low between mule and car, placed his left hand against Molly's rump, and ordered, "Gee!"

Molly swung sharply to the right, clattered the cars across open switches, and set her course between a pair of rails that led into the narrow blackness of an entry.

Old Davy waited at the mouth of the first room, his face indistinct and shadowy beneath the shielding glare of the light upon his cap. Probably the oldest worker in the mine, he had been born into it and had never known another way of life.

He pulled the coupling pin of the end car, and Mike helped him slue it across the switch and into the room that was a shambles of fallen props over a flood of coal that had been blasted out by the shots of the night before.

Old Davy set to work immediately with his heavy scoop shovel. Ten scoops, a bushel, three cents; twenty-five bushels, a ton, seventy-five cents; four tons a day, three dollars—more than twice as much money as he had been making just ten years ago! When the car was filled, he would top it off with chunks piled as high as the low roof would permit.

Mike did not tarry; there was work to be done; miners waiting. "Car!" he shouted at the next room.

Hank Staley's light bobbed out of the black depths. He was a tall man, and big. Never throughout the working day could he ever stand erect. He hurried from the room, crouched, careful of the low-hanging cross-beams. "I get 'im," he said, turning toward the end of the string.

"Hi-yup!" shouted Mike when he heard the return clink of the coupling bolt.

Here the entry began a sharp incline to a higher level where ancient, subterranean forces had shifted the rocky crust of the earth upward a full five feet. The muscles of Molly's rump rippled and corded beneath Mike's hand as she leaned heavier into her collar to trundle the remaining four cars slowly up the hill.

Two lights awaited him at the black mouth of the next room, shadowy figures behind them; Joe Spore and son.

"Car," said Mike, bringing Molly to a halt.

"We want two cars now," said Joe. He started back toward the end of the string.

Mike stepped from behind Molly and went back along the cars after him. "You take your turn like everybody else," he said.

"We are two," said Joe. "We take two cars!" He shook a fist.

"You are one," said Mike. "One man and helper. I tell you that before!"

"My son is a young man now!" Joe insisted. "Very strong!"

"He is still a boy! He should get good education!"

"I educate him to work like a man!" said Joe. "Like my father educated me!" He leaned over to uncouple the two end cars.

Mike shoved him roughly away, uncoupled the last car, and nudged it away from the others. "You get one-car turn!" he said, straightening up. "You want more, you go ask pit boss!"

He pulled himself angrily along the cars to the head of the string and mounted the bumper. Molly leaned into her collar, brought the tail chain taut, and set the cars into motion.

"We get more, you wait and see!" Joe was shouting after him. "Or you better look out! You may not work long!"

Since the Spores had come to work in the mine two weeks ago, they had given nothing but trouble—always wanting more than their share, ignoring the rights of others, hurling threats. The boy wasn't so bad, but he was a complete slave to his father's will, forced to follow in his father's footsteps.

When Mike stopped at the next room, he discovered he had only two cars left. That meant that one of the Spores had jerked a coupling pin on an extra car just as he had pulled away.

"Damn!"

He delivered the final car and began retracing his steps back toward the parting, carrying the butt-stick under one arm to keep it from clattering and banging over the ties at Molly's heels.

As he passed the Spores' room, he saw by their lights that they had the extra car.

Well, there was nothing he could do about it now. He wouldn't fight with them; he would just skip them on the next turn.

"Andy," he said, as if his son were present, "you will not work in the mines. Your father will make it all by himself."

At Hank's room, he picked up a loaded car left over from the day before and rode it the short distance back to the bottom.

Mike held up six fingers to the pit boss, and the pit boss nodded reluctantly. All in all, there were only eleven men working in the entry, and Mike was making a twelve-car turn. He would have to compensate on the next turn. A week ago, he had made the mistake of giving the Spores an extra car and had got reprimanded for it. He must not let it happen again. The spring layoff would come all too soon. Then there would be slack times, two or three months without work. He must stay out of trouble, not risk his job . . .

Mike delivered the last two cars of his second string to the two men who were working at the extreme end of the entry, forging the tunnel deeper and deeper into the black seam of coal so that more rooms could be opened in their wake.

They were lean men, work-hardened and tough, and their chores were

many. They took up bottom or broke down roof where necessary to afford head room for mule and driver. They erected permanent beams across the roof, shored the ribs where shoring was necessary, laid new ties along the extension of corridor, spiked rails to them and, in separate cars, loaded out the shale, slate, sulphur balls, dirt, and other debris of their advancement, for there was no room for gob piles along their narrow tunnel. Naked to the waist, they toiled, breathing deeply, bodies wet and black, for no matter how much fresh air the giant fans sent down the air shaft into the mine, the air at the dead end of an entry was always hot, stale, and dust-laden. They got paid by tonnage of coal, plus footage of progress.

Mike picked up four loads on the way back to the parting, delivered them, and dropped the tail chain hook into a string of five empties fresh from the top. They were wet and snow-laden, which meant that another wintry storm had gripped the world above.

He dropped a car each for Old Davy and Hank, and whispered encouragement to Molly as she toiled up the grade. Two lights bobbed at the entrance of the Spores' room. They had heard him coming and were waiting for him.

"We want car!" shouted Joe Spore as the string went by without slowing.

"You got two cars!" shouted Mike. "Now you skip a turn!"

The younger Spore lunged suddenly ahead, clutched Molly's halter, and jerked her to a stop. The slackened tail chain hit the ties, and Mike quickly thrust a shoulder into Molly's rump, his body braced to absorb the momentum of the cars so they would not crash over her heels. To a mine mule, a broken leg meant sudden and ultimate dispatch with a sledgehammer.

"Let go that mule!" he warned.

Joe was already heading back toward the end of the string. Mike leaped after him, clutched him by the shoulder as he stooped to pull a coupling pin, and spun him away. "You do not get car!" he shouted.

"We need car!" said Joe, backing away. "We need money!"

"You take turn!" said Mike, starting toward the head of the string.

He heard the swift shuffle of footsteps behind him and wheeled about just in time to see the swinging scoop shovel in Joe's hands. It was coming directly toward his head. He reached out with both hands, caught the handle of the scoop near its iron blade, and went stumbling back against

the cars. Then he twisted his arms and shoved. Joe went spinning back against the rib of the entry and fell heavily to a sitting position, the scoop clattering from his hands. "I get you!" he shouted, struggling to get his feet under him. "I get you! You squarehead!"

"I do not fight with you," said Mike, standing over him, "unless I have to. *But you do not get extra car!*" He picked up the shovel and flung it angrily away into the darkness.

"I get you, squarehead! You wait and see!"

Mike stepped back a pace. "Hi-yup, Molly!" he called, and as the mule obediently began trundling the cars forward, he hooked a ride on the rear bumper of the last car as it clattered by.

After delivering the remaining empties, he continued on to the face of the entry. The men had a car loaded and waiting, piled high with jagged pieces of shale that extended out over sides and ends. "Bring a load of props next trip," called one of them as Mike hooked the car and mounted a bumper. Mike bobbed his light in acknowledgment as he went trundling away, sharp shale stabbing at his back from the laden car.

He picked up two more loads along the way, and another load was waiting for him at the mouth of the Spores' room. He shunted it out onto the main track and added it to the string. The lights of father and son were huddled together at the far end of the room. Neither had bothered to come forward to help with the car.

At the top of the downward slope, he placed a protecting hand against Molly's rump and stiffened his arm as the string began its descent. "Easy, Molly," he said, feeling the pressure of the cars build up behind him. "Easy, girl."

Halfway down the slope, Molly's mincing steps became a gingery dance as she gradually increased her pace, picking her way rapidly over the ties and into the flickering shadows ahead as the hand pressed harder and harder against her. Outrun the cars, but not too fast. Hold back at the same time.

Approaching the foot of the slope; the cars reached maximum speed, jolting and bouncing, tail chain swaying. It was then that Molly, without warning, leaped suddenly to the left and away from the rails. Mike, finding Molly's rump no longer against his hand and the chain whipped away from beneath his foot, went sprawling forward. He saw the long slab of slate across the track just a split second before he fell heavily over it on hands and knees, the cars roaring and pounding behind him.

Taking advantage of his own momentum, Mike rolled quickly away from between the rails just as the lead car smashed into the rock barrier and leaped halfway across it. Molly squealed once in pain and fright, and a slab of shale shot from the top of the stalled car to shatter itself on the rail at Mike's head.

He scrambled to a sitting position, clutched his right knee in both hands, and slowly tried to straighten out the leg.

A light appeared at Hank's room, just a few yards away. Then Hank came running up, crouched low, arms swinging before him. "You all right?"

Mike nodded. "Look to the mule," he said. Then he rolled up his trouser leg and inspected his knee in the glow of the light that lay at his side. The kneecap was red, dented, and filled with pain, but there were no deep lacerations. He picked up his cap and light and got slowly to his feet, placing most of his weight on his left leg.

Hank came forward, leading Molly. "A bad cut and a bruise or two," he said. "But nothing broken."

"Good," said Mike. He hobbled over to Molly and inspected the ragged cut where a flying piece of shale had struck her just above the hock. Then he looked at the slab of slate beneath the car and up at the low roof above. There was no fresh break in the roof. The slab could have got across the rails only if two people had carried it and placed it there.

Hank, too, had taken in the situation. "Them devils up there tried to get you," he said, sweeping his light toward the top of the grade.

Mike nodded. "They mad because they don't get extra car."

"Joe spends too much time in saloon," said Hank. "Always in debt. Bad example for the boy."

Mike hobbled around the derailed cars and up the incline toward the Spores' room. Lights vanished from the mouth of the room as he approached. Obviously, the two had been standing just inside the room, watching and listening. The two lights turned toward him as he entered.

"You did that!" accused Mike. "You could have crippled me, caused me to lose work. You might have killed mule."

"Clumsy squarehead," taunted Joe. "You should watch maybe where you are going."

"I tell you once more," Mike said, evenly, "and for very last time. While I drive mule in this entry, *you get no extras!*"

"We poor people," Joe said, stubbornly. "We need extras."

"You not get them."

Mike turned to retrace his steps from the room and keep the peace.

"Then maybe we get new mule driver for sure!" Joe shouted after him.
"New mule driver tomorrow, maybe."

A report, of course, could be made to the pit boss, but Mike didn't want to do anything that might hint that he was incapable of handling his own job. Anyway, Andy would not want his father to run for help. Andy would be proud of a father who fought his own battles.

Hank, with the help of Old Davy, had the track cleared and two of the cars back on the rails by the time Mike returned. Together, they slued the other two cars into position and coupled them.

"You be careful," warned Hank. "They'll keep after you, try to break you one way or another."

Mike nodded and placed his arm over Molly's neck. "We both got bad legs," he said soothingly, "but we got to get work done." He hobbled along beside her as she set the cars into motion.

"You hurt?" the pit boss wanted to know as Mike came limping toward the parting.

Mike shook his head. "Just shook up a bit. Fall of slate."

The pit boss nodded his understanding. In spite of many safety measures, slate falls were not at all uncommon.

A mule driver brought in loads from another entry and hooked on to a string of empties. He scooped up a double handful of snow from one of the cars, squeezed it into a ball, and tossed it away into the darkness beyond his mule. "If this keeps up till quittin' time," he announced, "we'll be wadin' home through drifts hip deep!"

Mike was extra careful during the rest of the day. He still rode the tail chain, but each time he came to the brow of the hill he dismounted, shot a wooden sprag into one of the rear wheels of the end car, and then led Molly down the grade, his light piercing the shadows ahead, the spragged wheel squealing and grinding on the iron rail.

The Spores accepted their rightful turn in silence and gave him no further trouble.

Later, Mike seated himself on a battered powder keg just outside the mule barn, unhooked his light and placed it on the floor so that its glow shone away from his eyes, and took a sandwich from his lunch pail. All the miners had gone now. Some would be stopping at the saloon to wash the coal dust from their throats or to get a growler for home consumption.

Others would already be seeking the tin tub of hot water by the kitchen stove where they could wash the black grime from their white bodies so far as possible.

There came an occasional grunt or sigh from the mules as they munched their corn, the squeal of an angry rat, and the intermittent drip-drip of water seeping down from various faults in the roof. Otherwise, the silence was as complete as the great darkness that pushed in around the little island of light.

To Mike, it was the best part of the day. Here he could ease his back against the rough planking, feel his muscles relax from their crouched position, and be alone with his own thoughts for a few restful moments before taking up his final task, the task of shot-firing.

The mine was a new one and had, as yet, but four working entries and less than fifty rooms, but it was expanding rapidly as new entries were being driven and old ones extended. By next year there would be more than a hundred rooms.

As he ate his sandwich, washing it down with leftover coffee from the bottom compartment of his lunch pail, Mike's thoughts, as usual, turned to Andy. Andy could be proud of a father who was both a mule driver and shot-firer, a father strong enough to work at two jobs.

The miners, too, viewed the shot-firer with due respect. His was a dangerous job, and without him there would be no coal to load out the following morning, for rules of safety forbade all miners from touching off shots of their own during working hours. A windy shot—one that blew the tamping of coal dust from the drilled hole instead of exploding behind the coal itself—could easily ignite the resultant cloud of dust as if it were gunpowder. Once ignited, the cloud would hungrily suck in a dust-laden draft, expand, and go roaring down the entry and into the other entries, feeding itself as it went, charring and destroying everything in its path, and leaving an oxygenless void in its wake. Such explosions were few, yet the possibility was always present.

Mike tossed the crusty part of his sandwich to one side and took a final gulp of coffee from the pail. Well, the sooner he got at the job ahead, the quicker he would get home to Maria, a hot bath, supper, and, finally, bed.

He picked up the light and unscrewed its bottom section. In the resulting total darkness, he shook out the spent carbine, poured in fresh granules, spat upon them, heard them hiss, and quickly screwed the

bottom back into place. He cupped his palm over the reflector an instant to accumulate gas, roweled the automatic lighter with the heel of his hand, and popped the light into a six-inch lance of flame.

His injured knee paining him at each step, he picked his way across the switch rails at the parting, and headed toward the entry in which he and Molly had toiled during the day. The last cars to be brought down from above showed fresh accumulations of snow, which meant that the storm had not abated with the approach of night.

As usual, Old Davy's room was neat and trim, props well-set and tightly capped, fresh rails extended, and refuse and dirt loaded out. Mike swept the 30-foot face of the room with his light and saw at a glance the three pieces of torn newspaper dangling there, each piece marking the location of a shot so that the shot-firer would not have to waste precious moments searching for dark fuses hanging from their black background or, worse still, fail to find one and leave a shot unfired.

Light in hand, Mike picked up the first of the three fuses, speared flame into its split end, and saw it sputter into immediate life. The second fuse gave him a bit of trouble, and he had to peel the split ends farther back to expose more of the powder within before it responded to the touch of the flame. He had no fear of the first shot going off before he finished the work at hand, for the diggers always left enough fuse footage to insure the firer two or three minutes of safety—just in case he needed it. Seconds later, the third fuse lit, he limped from the room and into the entry.

Four shots showed in Hank's room, and Mike touched them off in rapid succession.

Halfway up the grade where the slag of slate across the rails had tumbled him earlier that day, Mike felt new pains begin to stab at his knee, and he was forced to slow his pace. By the time he reached the top of the little hill, he heard the sudden *whoomph* of one of the shots in Old Davy's room. Then, seconds later, *whoomph-whoomph* as the other two went off almost simultaneously. From now on, those jarring, muffled sounds would follow him through the darkness from entry to entry until his task was completed.

The Spores' room was cluttered, as usual. Props reached from floor to roof in crazy, unstable angles, and the floor was littered with the dust and debris of the day's work. There was a haphazard gob pile beside one pillar, and from it protruded the neck of a pint flask. Either Joe had been

bringing whiskey to the mine with him or he had simply used the bottle to carry water for his carbide light.

Mike limped over the strewn floor to the first of four shot-markers. The fuse that dangled from the black face was scarcely more than a foot in length, and the split in its end was much longer than necessary. Mike shook his head. Probably an eight-foot hole with four feet of blasting powder! Trying to move as much coal as possible with a single shot! Or trying to save a penny on fuse!

A touch of the light brought the fuse into instant life, and Mike took three crouching steps to the right to pick up the second fuse. It was properly split, but it failed to respond to the pencil of hot flame. The powder seemed moist, as if the fuse had been handled carelessly with sweaty fingers. Mike rolled the split ends farther back and tried again. Then he held the tongue of flame steadily in the split, burning and searing, until the powder finally began to sputter and hiss in an acceptable manner.

The end of the third fuse was blunt, unsplit. Mike fished from his pocket the sharp knife he always carried for such emergencies, opened it, and began to make the cut. The fuse was wet. He lopped off four inches of it and began to make a second cut.

It was then that alarming thoughts began to hammer suddenly at his brain. What if one of the Spores had deliberately set a shot fuse in that first hole, a fuse that reached back into the face only a foot or so instead of the customary three or four feet? Instead of the usual slow-acting powder that pushed the coal out in desirable chunks, what if there was rock-shattering dynamite in that hole that would send the coal flying in death-dealing splinters and shards?

Even as the thoughts went through his head, he was scrambling away from the face, trying to get to his feet. It was best not to take chances. He could stop and fire the remaining two shots on his return trip down the entry . . .

Mike felt, rather than heard, the sudden blast that rocked the room. A giant concussion of air staggered him, something slammed into the side of his head with stunning force, and he felt himself falling backwards—down, down, as if into some deep, black pit that was filled with flying props and crashing slate.

Half-stunned, he tried to roll out of the pit, tried to push himself up, but something was wrong. Something was holding him down. The air

was heavily laden with coal dust and the acrid odor of spent dynamite, and there was a feeble glow of light that formed a pale nimbus about him. He turned his head toward the source of the glow and saw his light lying on its side a few inches from his hand, the flame at the end of its tube reduced to a mere button of yellow. He reached out for it and felt a sudden pain stab through his left leg. Stark realization swept over him. He was pinned down, and the fuse of the second shot was burning its way into the face of coal.

He clutched up his light, clicked the water valve a notch or two farther open, shook the button of yellow into a white flame, and made a quick survey of his surroundings.

His left leg lay in a jagged pile of coal and rubble, across it was a fallen prop, and pressing down hard on the prop was a thick slab of slate. Another slab hung precariously down from the roof directly above him.

Mike didn't know if the blast had knocked him unconscious or not. His head pained. He couldn't remember; couldn't think straight. Even now, the fuse of that second shot could be sputtering just inches—seconds—from its explosive charge, a charge that could cut him to ribbons, engulf him in rubble, and bring more slate crashing down.

He placed his foot against the prop and pushed. The prop rocked back and forth, bringing stabbing jolts of pain to the leg beneath. Crouching his body closer, he placed his foot against the slate and gave a mighty shove that was strengthened by panic. The round prop acted as a roller, and the slab of slate went slithering away.

Freeing his leg quickly, he spun about to hands and knees and began scrambling over the debris away from the face. The second explosion hurled him from the mouth of the room and sent him sprawling across the rails in the entry.

The light flipped away from his fingers, went out, and a silent wave of total blackness swept over him.

Mike lay for a time where he had fallen, breathing heavily, wondering if he dared try to move. He finally rolled slowly to a sitting position and began patting the floor on either side, his fingers searching for the light, but even as he searched, he knew that the chance of finding it among the rubble was remote.

He slowly drew up his left leg and began exploring it with his fingers. His trousers and underwear were torn, wet, and slippery, and there was a long, jagged gash in the calf of his leg. He couldn't tell how bad the

wound was, but his fingers told him that it was deep and bleeding. Bad enough!

Alone in the darkness, he felt beaten and depressed. Now he would lose work, lose money—something no miner could afford in the winter-time—and all because of the stupidity and greed of one man. Had Joe really tried to kill him? Or was he merely trying to make things so dangerous for him that he would finally knuckle under? Either way, Joe had accomplished one thing; he would have a different mule driver in the morning, maybe one that would be afraid of him.

Mike had no fear of any further physical danger. Even without a light, there was no chance of becoming lost. He could easily follow the rails back to the parting and to the slope that would lead him up into the world above.

But, no, he must not do that! Andy would not respect a father who ran away from the job before him. He must find the light, fire the rest of the shots. Otherwise, the miners would come to work in the morning and find no coal. A wasted day!

He began searching for the light again, crawling from side to side, exploring each jagged piece of coal with his fingers. Head throbbing and leg filled with pain, he finally rolled over to his stomach for a moment of rest. It was then that his nose picked up the tangy, unmistakable odor of gas escaping from the unlit tube of the carbide light. Somewhere directly ahead! Hands groping, he inched forward until his eager fingers finally clutched the object of their search. He swung to a sitting position, heeled the wheel of the flint lighter, and saw the white flame shatter the darkness about him.

His first thought was his wounded leg. He held the light close to it and peeled back the bloody and torn trousers and underwear. The wound was long, deep, jagged, and dirty, and blood was still oozing from it. He sat looking at it, wondering what he should do. There was a water hydrant back at the parting, back by the mule barn. He could go there and wash the wound; but if he went back now, he would merely have to retrace his steps to fire the remaining shots in the entry. Best to fire the shots first, then fix the leg before going on into the next entry.

He pulled himself up along the rough wall of the tunnel to a standing position and stood for a moment with eyes closed, waiting for the dizziness to leave his head and for a sense of balance to return. Finally, he tested his leg with the weight of his body. Excruciating pain stabbed him, but

the leg held firm. He began hobbling forward along the littered rails. "Maybe we make 'im now, Andy," he whispered.

When he finally emerged from the entry and reached the mule barn, exhaustion had laid hold of him. He staggered to the hydrant and sat down on the wooden watering trough to rest. The muttering of the mules and their warm smell soothed him, and a darkness blacker than the pit itself began to creep over him. He felt himself drifting comfortably away into some sweet oblivion, an oblivion where there was no more work to be done, no pain, no waiting drifts of snow to flounder through. He struggled against the feeling and finally succeeded in shaking the sticky shadows from his brain. Then he bared his wound and extended his leg across the trough beneath the mouth of the hydrant. The water was cold and numbing, but it sent a refreshing tingle through his body that partially revived him from impending lethargy.

The wound was caked with dried blood mingled with coal dust, and new blood was seeping from it. He washed it as best he could, trying to think what he could use as a bandage, but there was no material available except feed sacks, burlap, and his own rough and dirty clothing. He would wait, think of something later on. There was work to be done, shots still to be fired in the rooms along the other entries . . .

It seemed hours before he finally succeeded in dragging himself back to the parting, his task completed. He sat down on a powder keg to rest, and exhaustion swept over him again in a great, smothering wave. He wanted nothing more than to lie down on the inviting floor and let deep, warm shadows engulf him. The miners would find him there in the morning, see to it that he got safely home . . .

He didn't know if he had drifted away into a half-sleep or not, but he found himself suddenly wide awake. Maria! She would be wondering about him, worrying. He was already late, later than he had ever been before. She would feel certain that some terrible tragedy had befallen him in the mine, or that he had got lost in the storm. She might awaken the neighbors, organize a search party. Or, worse still, she might come alone in search for him, come trudging through the storm.

He couldn't let either of those things happen. He would have to get home under his own power, somehow. He couldn't afford to be found helpless, unable to do his work. He would have to get home, get his leg looked after, get some sleep, and get back on the job in the morning. To be off work because of illness might even cost him his job!

He began coughing, and the scene about him began to grow dimmer. Were the dust clouds from the exploded shots catching up with him, or was something happening to his eyes? Whatever it was, he realized now that if he expected to get home, he would have to start while he still had strength enough left.

He cast his light toward the mouth of the slope. The incline seemed steeper than before, insurmountable, and even if he did succeed in staggering to the top, there were the drifts of snow to be taken into consideration.

Yet he had to try. There was little else he could do. Andy would expect his father to make an effort, not lie down and shift responsibility to others.

He needed a crutch, something to lean on. He swept his light over the spidery rails of the entry. There was nothing there except a few piles of cumbersome props. Perhaps in the mule barn . . .

Thoughts of the mule barn brought a new idea creeping into his brain. The idea was hazy and rather mixed up, but the more he pondered it, the more promise it held.

Minutes later, he came stumbling from the barn, leading Molly by her halter. "Whoa-up, girl," he said. "Steady." Then he brought the powder keg to her side, mounted it, and forced his injured leg over her shaggy back. She tossed her head around to look inquiringly at him. This was something new to her, something quite beyond the normal call of duty.

The light dangling from his left hand, he circled her neck with his other arm and rested his cheek comfortably against her. He lay there a moment, waiting for the giddiness to clear from his head.

"Hi-yup!" he commanded, presently. Molly swung to the right, toward the entry in which she was accustomed to toil.

"Haw!" shouted Mike. "Haw! Hi-yup!"

Molly straightened her course to the left, entered the mouth of the slope, and began carefully picking her way up and over the unfamiliar pattern of ties that clutched at her feet.

Mike lay low upon her, keeping his head down and his body flat to avoid the rough beams of the roof.

The moist warmth of the mine slid slowly back and away, and crisper, colder air took its place. Then the air became cold, and the timbers and beams of the slope showed white and ghostly where the moisture from the mine had turned to hoarfrost upon them.

Mike, his head dangling against the side of Molly's neck, sensed rather

than felt that she had ceased her forward motion. He cast the rays of his light ahead. A drift of white lay across their path, and more snow was whirling and eddying. Molly laid her stubby ears back and made a whimpering sound through her nose, and Mike felt the quick shudder that rippled through her body as she studied the unfamiliar world of white that lay before her.

"It will be all right, Molly," he promised her. "You will sleep with neighbor's cow in warm barn tonight. Hi-yup!"

Molly stepped obediently forward into the drift, head lowered, ears flattened, shod hooves seeking purchase in the alien substance that sought to mire her legs. She went gingerly ahead, step after step, eyes blinking against the white flakes that gyrated blindingly about her head.

Mike could see nothing now save the snow-filled nimbus of yellow that pressed in about him. He rose higher on Molly's back, swept his light about and finally hooked it into the shield of his cap—where the wind promptly guttered it and blew it out. Then there was only the whiteness of the drifts beneath, the blackness above, and the rush and whip of flakes upon his face.

Directly to his right and down in the little valley lay the hidden houses of the camp. All he had to do was to turn in that direction and keep going downhill until he could find their black hulks.

"Gee, Molly!" he commanded. "Gee, girl!" And then, as Molly turned sharply to the right, "Hi-yup, Molly! Hi-yup!"

Molly floundered ahead and went to her belly in a drift.

"Hi-yup, girl!" Mike encouraged. "Hi-yup! We make 'im yet! You see."

Molly struggled forward and found firmer footing, only to plunge knee-deep in another drift a few feet farther on.

Mike shielded his eyes with a hand and tried to get his bearings, but the swirling snow shut out everything except the immediate drifts beneath him, the drifts that pulled at Molly's trembling legs. He could not see the slope of the land. The undulation of drifts had hidden the contour beneath a rolling blanket of mystery. There was no up, no down, just billows of white that lost themselves in almost instant nothingness.

Molly stumbled, and Mike fell forward to her neck. He clung there with both arms while blackness and confusion hammered at his brain. "Steady, girl," he whispered. "Steady." Then complete lethargy swept over him, closing in upon him, severing mind from body. "Steady," he whispered again, and slid slowly from her back into a soft bed of oblivion.

Mike awakened to find himself engulfed in a bright blanket of white. It took a while for his eyes to adjust sufficiently to find that the whiteness about him was the clean, soft sheets of his own bed and the brilliant sunlight that streamed through a window. He hadn't seen sunlight for more than a month, and its glare hurt his eyes. He squinted and shifted his gaze upward. Maria was standing beside him, her dark, shy eyes filled with anxiety.

"You—you all right?"

Mike shifted his position tentatively. "Y-yes . . . I-I guess so."

"You have company," she whispered. "I bring him in."

She left, and a moment later the doorway was filled with the bulk of Big Matt Trimbull, mine superintendent. His face was square and lined and the hair at his temples, once red, was a rusty grey. He carried his great mackinaw coat and fur cap over one arm. "You feel a little better now?" he asked.

"Yes," Mike said, hurriedly. "I be back to work tomorrow. Right away!"

Big Matt sat down in a chair and let his coat and cap spill to the floor beside him. "I think not," he said. "Doc says you have a very bad leg, lost a lot of blood. You stay in bed. Rest. We have a man to take your place."

Mike nodded. Naturally, a new man would have to take over, take both his jobs . . .

"We found out this morning what happened to you last night," Big Matt went on. "The trace of dynamite in Joe Spore's room, the two unfired shots, your fuse knife lying on the floor, the blood. And Joe is no longer working for us. He is a dangerous man. Besides what he did to you, he might have caused an explosion, ruined the entire mine."

Mike was silent. He was thinking about the loss of his two jobs, wondering how long he would be without work.

"Some of the boys will stop in to see you tonight after work," said Big Matt. "They want to thank you. If you had not fired the shots last night, the mine could not have worked today."

Mike shifted his position to ease the pain that was gnawing at his leg and felt the great tiredness begin to steal over him again. "Andy like that," he said, a faint smile touching his lips. "Andy like that miners want to come see me."

Big Matt picked up his cap and coat and got to his feet. "Your wife and the neighbor men would never have found you last night in that snow

drift," he said, "if it hadn't been for the mule standing over you, marking the spot where you fell."

"Molly is all right?"

Big Matt nodded. "She is taking the day off and has an extra measure of oats. I'll go now so you can rest and get back to work soon." He stood for a moment looking down at Mike, wondering how in the world the injured man could possibly have persuaded a stubborn mine mule to carry him up out of the mine on her back and through a wintry blast of wind and snow. "You certainly must have a way with mules," he said.

Mike grinned. "Maybe we understand each other," he said. "We both squareheads."

"Whatever it is," said Big Matt, "I'm going to need you. The entries will be worked all summer to enlarge the mine; and by next fall we'll need many new mules. You will break them, train them, and help build new cars. Work all summer."

Happiness mingled suddenly with the great tiredness that had settled over him, pushing him down. Mike felt his eyes begin to close as if of their own accord. "Andy will like that," he said, drowsily. "Andy will be proud that I work all summer." He scarcely finished the sentence before sleep claimed him, leaving a lingering smile upon his lips.

At the kitchen door, Big Matt shrugged into his great coat and began pulling on his heavy boots. "You feed him well, Mrs. Kovchec," he said. "And make him rest. He'll be well again in no time."

"Yes," Maria said, shyly, trying to hide her embarrassment. Never before in her entire life had such a great personage as a mine superintendent graced her home. He had made a special trip through the snow—and she had been too busy to tidy up the house.

Big Matt straightened up from his boots. "This Andy," he said, questioningly. "Mike spoke his name a couple times."

Maria looked at the floor. "Andy is—" She hesitated. "I don't know how to say. Andy is—well, he is what makes Mike work hard, try always to be good man."

Big Matt nodded. "I understand," he said, covering her confusion.

"If he had lived, Andy would be nearly fourteen now . . ."

Big Matt retraced the trail he had made through the sun-sparkled drifts. Once he stopped, shook his head, and then continued on again. He, too, had once had a son. But it had been so very long ago . . .

Memory Game

by William Link & Richard Levinson

"All right, now, give this a try, Mr. Perkins. What's the altitude of Mount Everest?"

Mr. Leroy Perkins touched his glass to the bar and then observed the neat, wet circle that it made. "Twenty-nine thousand, one hundred and forty-one feet," he answered.

"Check it, Sam," said one of the men at the bar.

The bartender paged through a copy of the *World Almanac*. "Yep," he said. "He's right."

"Another round, Leroy?" Jake Underwood asked. Jake was a shriveled little man, Mr. Perkins' neighbor, and the two of them drank together every night.

"I don't think so, Jake. We've already had our three." Mr. Perkins studied his reflection in the bar mirror. It looked pleasantly blurred to him, a signal that he had had enough.

Sam flipped to another page. "What was Lou Gehrig's batting average in 1925?"

Mr. Perkins yawned. A glance at his pocket watch showed him it was already eleven. Alice was probably standing at the window, waiting for him to appear under the street light. Let her wait, he thought with sudden anger. I'm a man; I can come home when I damn well please. "That'd be .295," he told Sam.

"Yeah," said someone else. "But how many consecutive games did he play?"

"Two thousand, one hundred and thirty."

"That's what it says in here," said Sam. "What a memory."

Mr. Perkins curled his thin lips in a smile. Yes, what a memory. Sometimes he even amazed himself. Ever since he was a boy he had used the infinite quantity of his mind to amuse and astonish others. It was as if nature had compensated for his fragile body, his poor health, his myopic

vision. Occasionally, he thought it a shame that he had not used his memory professionally, rather than just as a hobby. But Alice would have forbidden it. He could imagine her scalding remarks: "Are you crazy? What do you want people to think you are—a freak?"

"Come on, let's have another one," Jake whispered. "Alice won't be able to tell the difference."

"Afraid not, Jake. Three a night. That's my limit."

"You've had more'n that some nights."

"Only twice before, both last year. And then I only had four."

Jake grunted and slid off his stool. "Well, if you're not gonna drink with me I may as well go home. Clara will give me the dickens if I'm not back by eleven-thirty."

Mr. Perkins didn't look at him. They usually left the bar together every night. But on this particular evening, with vague rebellion in his blood, he wanted to stay. Let Alice wonder for a change. Let her—"See you tomorrow, Jake."

"Okay, Leroy. 'Night."

Jake moved through the door and some of the other men, as if following an example, finished their drinks and began to leave.

Mr. Perkins' eyes met those of the drunk standing alone at the end of the bar. The man was resting his unshaven chin on the lip of his glass. Mr. Perkins knew the man had been there, off and on, for the past month. Just sitting there, evening after evening, ordering cheap bourbon and listening to them play the memory game.

Sam began wiping the counter. "Maybe you'd better go home, Mr. Perkins," he said with a half-grin. "Alice will give you hell."

"No she won't," he said loudly. He noted that the alcohol had enriched the timbre of his voice, added cubits to his courage. "She'll get a good beating if she so much as opens her mouth."

The bartender turned, but Mr. Perkins caught his smile in the mirror. He's laughing at me, he thought. What a fool he must think I am! In here every night with Jake, playing the game, and then talking about Alice or Clara. Two henpecked fools distilling bravery from a bottle.

Blushing, Mr. Perkins rose from the stool and put his tip on the counter. "Well, I'll be going. 'Night, Sam."

"'Night, Mr. Perkins. Don't run *too* fast." Sam laughed and winked at the drunk.

Mr. Perkins made his way to the door. He should have walked home

with Jake; it would have saved him this embarrassment. As he was about to go out a voice called to him softly. "Mr. Perkins?"

Startled, Mr. Perkins turned and saw the drunk approaching him. "And what do you want?"

The drunk motioned to a private booth. "Sit down. I want to talk to you."

Probably wants a loan or a handout of some kind, Mr. Perkins thought. "I really have to go," he said. "My wife's expecting me."

"This won't take long."

Mr. Perkins stared at him. The man was young, twenty-eight or twenty-nine, with a moist, dissipated face. The astonishing fact was that he didn't look a bit drunk. His eyes were perfectly clear.

"Sit down." The man slid into the booth.

Mr. Perkins obeyed, timorously. "W-what is it?"

"I been comin' in here pretty regularly lately. You seen me?"

Mr. Perkins nodded. Behind him, he could hear Sam closing up for the night.

"I watched that game you play with the bartender. You're great. How come you remember all that stuff?"

"I—don't know. I just don't forget things I hear or read."

Some of the overhead lights went out, throwing an island of shadow across the booth. "I'll bet you do a lot of reading," the man said. "It keeps Alice off your back, huh? Keeps you from thinkin' about her."

Mr. Perkins didn't answer.

"Listen, I keep hearin' you complain about your wife to that buddy of yours. About what a hard time she gives you: You wanna get rid of her?"

The calm words, so casually expressed, stunned Mr. Perkins. His back stiffened; he could feel the tingle of blood rushing to his face. "W-what did you say?" he stammered.

"I said, do you wanna get rid of her? Permanently."

Mr. Perkins groped to his feet. "I really must go."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I—I didn't hear what you said."

"Yes you did."

"We're closing up, Mr. Perkins," Sam called. "You don't want Alice to come looking for you, do you?"

Mr. Perkins moved out of the booth and went quickly toward the door.

"Hey!" the man called. "Come back a minute."

Mr. Perkins slammed the door and hurried off down the empty street. I should have gone home with Jake, he thought. Then none of this would have happened. He tried to put it out of his mind, but the man's question kept repeating itself. *Do you wanna get rid of her. Permanently?* He tried to blot it out, but he was unable to. It was still buzzing in his mind when he arrived home and found Alice waiting for him.

The following evening after dinner, Mr. Perkins sat exhausted in the living room. It was Saturday and Alice had made him paint the basement. His bones ached from climbing up and down the step-ladder, stretching his body at uncomfortable angles over the damp walls. He dreaded Sunday's coming, for after church he would be sent down to finish the job.

He went quietly to the closet and took his coat and hat. It would be good to snuggle into Sam's and look down on the world from a high stool.

"Leroy?" Alice had come in from the porch. "Where are you going?"
"Just down to Sam's."

"Not tonight. You have to finish the cellar."

"Alice," he began to protest, "I have all day tomorrow to—"

"Tomorrow you've got that planting in the garden. So just take off your coat and go downstairs."

Mr. Perkins sighed deeply. It was useless to argue with her. He had tried that only five times in his married life, and the results had been painful. He put his coat and hat back in the closet and slammed the door.

"Stop slamming things!" Alice called from the kitchen.

Mr. Perkins went down the stairs into the basement. A dim bulb illuminated the half-finished walls, the sticky gallon cans of fresh paint. His overalls lay on the cement floor like a collapsed tent. They smelled of turpentine and perspiration. He felt slightly dizzy from the aroma of mustiness and raw paint. No, it was an impossibility. He couldn't manage painting the wall tonight.

He tiptoed to the door that led to the back yard and listened for a few moments. Alice was upstairs, running water in the sink. Carefully, he opened the door and drifted along the side of the house. He wore no coat and the evening wind chilled his face and bare arms. He ducked under the kitchen window, heard Alice humming to herself. Then he edged around the garage and walked out to the street.

"Hey, Leroy."

Mr. Perkins whirled, his heart pounding. Then he relaxed; the voice had come from Jake Underwood's house. He could see the tip of Jake's

cigar glowing over a row of geraniums on the porch railing. "I'll be right with you, Jake," he called.

"How far is the Rio de la Plata river from Buenos Aires?"

"Approximately one hundred and seventy-five miles," said Mr. Perkins. He looked across at the drunk and saw that the man was watching him. The unblinking, careful stare unnerved him.

Sam was smiling. "Right on the button. Bull's-eye. Don't you ever miss?"

"I guess not." He glanced at Jake who was resting his head on the bar, snoring softly. Too much Scotch, Mr. Perkins thought. He drinks more every night. Poor old guy.

When he looked up, the drunk had sat down beside him. Sam was at the far end of the bar, serving a customer.

"Did you think over what I said?"

Mr. Perkins was silent for a while. Then he nodded.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Mr. Perkins watched Jake, but the old man was still sleeping.

"It'll cost you money," the drunk said.

"How much?"

"A thousand bucks. Cash."

Mr. Perkins finished his drink. "That's—that's out of the question. I couldn't get my hands on that much."

"Eight hundred."

"Still too much."

Jake began to stir.

The drunk seemed restless. "Listen, we can't talk here. Meet me outside in ten minutes. Without your friend." He went to the door, opened it, and walked out to the street.

"How 'bout another round, Leroy?" Jake said thickly.

"I've had my three, Jake. Sorry. Besides, I'm leaving in a few minutes. Have to go back and finish some painting."

"At this hour?" Jake asked.

"That's right."

Mr. Perkins waited a full ten minutes, then said goodnight to Jake and Sam.

The drunk was standing against the side of the building when he came

out. "Let's grab a bus, Perkins," he said. "I don't want anybody seein' us walkin' together on the street."

They took a south-bound bus and the drunk let Mr. Perkins pay the fare. The bus was reasonably empty and they took seats in the rear.

"Now let's get down to business," said the drunk. "How much *can* you afford?"

"Five hundred dollars," said Mr. Perkins.

"You're crazy! You think I want to risk the electric chair for that?"

"But that's all I can possibly scrape up."

The drunk stared through the window. The bus was entering the suburbs, a vast area of new development houses. Abruptly, he turned back to Mr. Perkins. "How much jewelry does your wife have?"

"Three pieces, heirlooms. Why?"

The drunk propped his feet on the seat in front of him. "How much are they worth?"

"Well, we had them appraised a few months ago."

"You happen to remember how much—"

"Four hundred and eighty dollars," Mr. Perkins said.

The drunk laughed. "I forgot about the way you remember things. Okay, I'll take the jewelry. Plus the five hundred. That way the cops'll think it's a robbery."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Perkins.

"When do you want it to happen?"

"Happen?" Mr. Perkins was puzzled for a moment. It all didn't seem quite real. But this request for a date suddenly gave it actuality. "Let's say, well, let's say this coming Monday night. Jake and I can go down to Sam's while you—well, you know."

"Good idea. If the police check you'll have a perfect alibi. Hell, you've been going down there every night for—how long now?"

"Three years, two months, and fifteen days," said Mr. Perkins.

"Yeah. Well, as I say, it's a perfect alibi. When can you have the five hundred?"

"I can take it out of the bank Monday morning."

"Good. Where can you leave it for me?"

"It'll be in the pocket of a pair of overalls in the basement. Alice will never look there."

The drunk rose and stood swaying over the seat. "Here's where I get off. I'll give you my phone number in case anything goes wrong."

Mr. Perkins listened to the drunk's telephone number, amazed by the audacity of the thing he had just done. The bargain was made. Everything neat and simple. A conference on a dream-like bus ride and soon, Monday night to be exact, Alice would cease to be a burden.

"Any questions?"

"No." Mr. Perkins dug into his watch pocket. "Here, I'll give you my house key."

"I don't want it. This has to look legitimate. I'll jimmy a window."

"Sorry," said Mr. Perkins. "I guess I'm an amateur at these things."

The drunk smiled. "Just make sure to leave your place at nine o'clock Monday night and go straight to Sam's. I'll leave mine at nine-thirty and be at your house about ten. Right?"

Mr. Perkins nodded. He was about to extend his hand, but he suddenly realized it wouldn't be the proper thing to do. He watched as the drunk swung up the aisle and left the bus.

The following night, after dinner, Mr. Perkins' telephone rang. He was stretched out on the bed, recuperating from the siege of painting that morning. The thought occurred to him, while Alice's high-heels tapped downstairs in the living room, that perhaps *he* was calling. Panic stricken, he shouted, "I've got it, Alice!" and grabbed for the phone. "Hello?"

"Perkins?"

It was the drunk's voice, no mistake about that.

"You shouldn't have called here," Mr. Perkins whispered.

"What?"

"I said you shouldn't have called me here. There's an extension downstairs and my wife might listen in."

There was a short pause. "Well? What do you think? Is she listening or not?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay. I'll make this short. I want more money."

Mr. Perkins dabbed at his wet forehead. "But I told you—"

"Another two hundred. You can spare it."

"But I can't! I thought we had this all straightened out."

"Seven hundred in cash, Perkins. Agreed? After all, I can't get much for your jewelry. And I'm taking a big chance."

Mr. Perkins darted over to the bedroom door and eased it closed. Then

he said angrily into the phone, "All right. But this is a dirty trick to play."

"Leave the money in the overalls, right?"

"Right."

"Then tomorrow night it is. 'Bye.' The connection snapped off.

Mr. Perkins replaced the receiver and dropped back on the bed. His heart was pounding, his hands were ice-cold. Suppose something went wrong? he thought. Suppose Alice decided to visit a friend and wasn't home when the drunk broke in? No, he refused to think about it. Besides, he would be insured by a perfect alibi. Monday night would be like any other night: he would eat dinner, walk leisurely to Sam's, have a few drinks and play the memory game . . . He rolled over and tried to go to sleep.

"Here's one for you, Mr. Perkins," Sam said. "How many votes did Buchanan get against Fremont and Fillmore in 1856?"

Mr. Perkins took a slow sip of his drink and looked around at the others. They had seen his exhibition every night for years now, but it still fascinated them. "One million, eight hundred and thirty-eight thousand, one hundred and sixty-nine," he said, finally.

Sam snapped the encyclopedia closed. "Right," he said with a jerk of his head.

The others shouted approval, a few slapping Mr. Perkins on the back. He smiled at them and then stole a look at his watch. It was almost nine-fifteen. At the half-hour mark the drunk would be leaving to do his special work.

Mr. Perkins took his fresh drink and tinkled the ice with his swizzle stick. Tonight he would have more than three. He felt buoyant. Sam had the door and windows open and the fresh breeze brought the smell of grass and trees into the stale room. It would feel wonderful to be free, Mr. Perkins thought. Like a spring kite cut loose. He would sell the house and rent a bachelor's apartment near the park. Maybe he'd buy himself a little car, one of the economical sports models. He had certainly fooled the drunk: There was still two thousand dollars left in his savings account, ready to be taken out the day after Alice's funeral. Maybe he'd quit his job at the insurance company and go on the stage with a magic memory act. It was possible, it was possible . . .

He took a strong pull of the drink and looked up. His friend Jake had come in. "Leroy!" he said. "Leroy!"

"What is it, Jake?"

Jake squeezed in beside him, his small face puckered with excitement.
"Listen to this—"

"Calm down. Listen to what?"

"I looked over at your house when I left tonight. Somethin's going on."

"What are you talking about?"

"There were cops there!" Jake said. "Alice opened the door and let them in. And then this other cop drove their car out of sight. They're waitin' for somebody, Leroy. It must be that."

Mr. Perkins dug his nails into the hard wood of the bar. Alice must have listened to the phone call on the extension! What a devil. She had the police waiting and they would catch the drunk. It would be all over, finished. The drunk would squeal on him and they'd put him in prison. Alice would be fiendishly happy; she would love to see him behind bars.

But wait! He looked at his watch. It was only nine-twenty. The drunk still had ten minutes before he left his house. There was plenty of time to call him, to warn him not to leave.

Mr. Perkins sprang from the stool, upsetting it. "Hey!" Sam yelled.

The telephone booth was near the doorway. It was empty. Smiling, Mr. Perkins pulled the door open and slid into the cubicle. He reached into his trouser pocket and removed his change. Ahh, the luck! he thought. There were three shiny dimes on his palm. He dropped one into the slot and listened to the dial tone. Then he lifted his hand and shot his forefinger toward the dial. And then he stopped, his stomach suddenly dead, his thoughts petrified.

He had forgotten the telephone number.



A Place to Hide

by Richard Deming

After his nightmarish month of running, the sight of the Conway farm was like the vision of salvation to Arthur Little.

Just as his murdered partner had described it, the farm was situated in a beautiful little valley with mountains towering on all four sides. A white frame one-story cottage nestled in the center, and fences enclosed approximately fifty acres, of which only about five seemed to be cultivated. The rest were pasture where a few cattle and sheep grazed. Though the outbuildings seemed in need of paint, both the house and the land possessed a neat, well-cared-for air.

Best of all, it was isolated. It was rather a good joke on Clarence that almost the last words he ever spoke had directed his murderer to this refuge.

His luck all along had been amazing, he thought. With his picture on every front page in the country, it was little short of miraculous that he had got all the way from Manhattan to Colorado without being captured. It did not occur to him that after a month of riding freight trains, of eating at odd intervals, usually in hobo jungles, of not shaving and rarely washing, no one could possibly have recognized him.

When he left New York he was an immaculate little man who wore a thin moustache and clear nail polish and affected a silver cigarette holder. As a one-word description, "trim" would have fitted him. Now the only visible characteristic remaining was his littleness. His two-hundred-dollar suit looked like something third-hand from the Salvation Army, and his custom-built shoes were scratched and cracked beyond repair.

Had he deliberately striven for effect, he could not have adopted a more perfect disguise, but fear kept him from realizing it, and he blanched under his dirt at every casual eye.

As he entered the valley, his fear began to depart for the first time since he had crunched the heavy brass ashtray into his partner's skull,

then turned to find his horrified secretary watching him from the doorway. In place of fear, resentment at the unreasonable circumstances which had brought him to this state began to well within him.

Nothing had gone right, from the unaccountable downward spiral of Clyde Copper, which gobbled up four hundred thousand dollars of "borrowed" money, to the impromptu murder of Clarence Stone in an attempt to cover his embezzlement. In a way, the latter was Clarence's own fault, for the thought of murder would never have occurred to Arthur had Clarence not suggested a bargain.

"I'm willing to make a deal, Arthur," Clarence had said. "There is no chance to save the investment business, and in view of your clever book-keeping, there is no chance for either of us to escape prison. I know I'm over a barrel. No jury will ever believe you looted our clients' accounts for eight months before I discovered it, and I know you too well to believe you will shoulder the blame alone. You'll try to scoot out from under by assuming the part of the easily-led junior partner and placing the major blame on me. With luck on your side, I'll get the ten years you deserve, and you'll get about five."

Then came Clarence's strange confession that he was not a widower, as he had led Arthur to believe when they had joined forces five years before.

"My real name is Charles Conway," he said. "I deserted my wife and child in Colorado eight years ago. I won't go into my reasons, for you wouldn't understand them. My wife is a wonderful woman in many ways, and I loved my son. Let's say I simply grew tired of farm life."

Arthur's pale eyes had flicked at his partner puzzledly as he tried to imagine how this confession pertained to the present situation. Clarence Stone had a reputation for practical joking, but this hardly seemed a time to indulge a sense of humor.

"About four months ago I hired a private detective to investigate my family's situation," Clarence said. "They live on the farm, and a year ago my wife had me declared legally dead.

"The farm is seventy miles from Fort Collins, in the heart of the Rockies. It's in a beautiful but isolated valley seven miles from Three Corners, which is little more than a trading post for hunters and trappers. The house has all modern conveniences, including running water and electricity. I installed the gasoline power plant myself. But there is no telephone, no radio because the mountains kill reception, no mail deliv-

ery, and hardly ever a visitor. A fugitive could hide there for years without detection."

Clarence crossed to his desk, drew a rough map in pencil on a piece of scratch paper, and handed it to Arthur. "Follow that, and you should find it easily. The farm badly needs a hired hand; and all you have to do is walk in and ask for the job. I'll guarantee my wife will welcome you, both as a worker and because she must be lonely. I also guarantee she will not turn you in, even if she suspects you are hiding from the law, providing you are able to convince her you aren't dangerous to have around. She's an unusually sympathetic woman."

"Is this one of your jokes?" Arthur asked suspiciously.

"Would I joke only an hour after discovering I'm bankrupt and facing prison?" Clarence asked in a harsh tone.

Arthur shook his head in timid agreement.

"That's the perfect hideout I offer you," Clarence said. "After a year people will have forgotten you in favor of more current criminals, you can change your name and start over a free man. The alternative is at least five years in prison. I'll allow you four days to get there before I break the news of our bankruptcy. In return for all this, I want a written statement from you."

"What kind of statement?"

Drawing another sheet of scratch paper to him, Clarence picked up the pencil again. "I'll draft exactly what I want you to say, and you will copy and sign it in ink."

Arthur rose from his chair to peer over his partner's shoulder. Clarence was writing. "I assume the entire blame for the irregularities in the accounts of the Stone-Little Investment Company. My partner had no knowledge of my illegal procedures or of my false book entries."

Clarence paused, wet the tip of his pencil, and stared at the paper thoughtfully.

It was then the idea struck Arthur, an idea so monstrous it made his knees turn weak. The note his partner was writing, even unsigned, could release Arthur from the whole nightmarish mess, for handwriting experts would be able to identify the writing as that of Clarence Stone.

He glanced at the office window, open to the prematurely warm weather of early June, and visualized the body of his partner crashing to the sidewalk ten stories below with such force that all marks of violence preceding the fall would be obliterated. If Clarence committed suicide . . .

There would never be another chance like this. In fact, this chance might slip by while he hesitated, for at any moment Clarence might begin to slip into the text names that would disclose for which partner's signature the confession was drawn.

Clarence's thoughtful frown smoothed, and his pencil descended to the paper again. In an almost hysterical reflex action Arthur picked up the brass ash receiver that stood beside the desk, swung it high in the air, and brought it crashing down on top of his partner's head.

As he neared the farmhouse, Arthur shook himself. What was done was done, and no amount of brooding could mend the past. Before him was sanctuary until his crimes were forgotten and he could begin to build a new life. From here on he would look forward only.

He was on the front porch before he realized how exhausted he was from lack of food and sleeping in box cars. After rapping on the door, he had to steady himself against the jamb with one hand.

The woman who came to the door was in her middle thirties, a strong, pleasant-faced woman with a plump figure and a freshly scrubbed appearance. She examined Arthur's disheveled clothing and unkempt beard with neither disapproval nor approval.

"Yes?" she inquired crisply.

Now that he was here, Arthur's tongue deserted him, for he had planned no farther than his arrival. He stood licking his caked lips and gazing at his scuffed toes a full minute before the woman spoke again.

"Come in," she said tartly, stepping aside.

Almost staggering, he followed her through a parlor into a kitchen as modern as any you could find in Manhattan. It included a white porcelain sink, indirect lighting, an electric stove, and a refrigerator. But its most interesting furnishing, to Arthur, was a table loaded with steaming food.

A boy of about twelve rose from the table as they entered and stood beside his chair.

"You may meet the gentleman later, Charles," the woman said in her crisp voice. Then to Arthur, "This way, please."

Uncomprehending, he followed her past the wonderfully loaded table, through a bedroom, and into a modern bath. She pointed to a wicker hamper in one corner.

"Throw your clothes in that," she said. "All of them. I'll lay some of my deceased husband's things on the bed for you. They'll fit, for he was

small too. You'll find his shaving equipment in the medicine cabinet. The razor will need honing, because it hasn't been used in eight years. You may use that towel." She indicated the center of three towel racks.

"Couldn't I have something to eat first?" Arthur asked faintly.

She looked at him in surprise. "I wouldn't allow such filth at my table," she said in such a matter-of-fact tone there was no sting to the statement. "We've nearly finished eating, but I'll keep something warm for you."

Closing the bathroom door, she left him alone.

Such was Arthur Little's (or Arthur Long, as he now rather unimaginatively called himself) somewhat unconventional introduction to his late partner's former home. He found Laura Conway, as his partner had said, a rather unusual woman. Briskly businesslike, she matter-of-factly accepted his offer to work for board and room without a sign of curiosity, though she must have suspected at once from his appearance, after the dirt and whiskers were removed, that he was not a farm laborer.

Had his appearance and speech not given him away, his lack of experience would have, for he knew nothing of farming. He was willing to work, in moderation, however, and Mrs. Conway seemed patiently understanding about his lack of knowledge and went out of her way to explain the various duties required of him. But he did note a mild impatience on her part if he failed to grasp an explanation the first time or was slow in picking up such farm skills as milking.

To Arthur's surprise, the work was not nearly as back-breaking as he had always supposed farm work to be. The hours were long—seven A.M. to five P.M., with a half-hour for lunch—but the work was relatively easy, and he was allowed by Mrs. Conway to pursue it as leisurely as he wished.

Part of the reason for this, Arthur realized, was that both Mrs. Conway and her son, Charles, continued to work in the manner to which they had been accustomed before he had arrived. They continued to do all the work in the fields, while Arthur's duties considered largely of feeding the livestock; milking, running the cream separator, and churning butter.

The cottage contained five rooms, of which two were bedrooms. Mrs. Conway assigned him to a single bed in Charles's room which was connected by the bath to her room. It was a quiet but not unpleasant existence. For the first two weeks Arthur rather enjoyed it, but then he began to grow a trifle bored.

Once a week Mrs. Conway loaded butter, cheese, eggs, and whatever other farm produce there happened to be, into the station wagon, the

only means of transportation on the farm, and drove to Three Corners. She returned with supplies and mail, the latter consisting largely of advertisements, and a weekly rural paper in which Arthur was gratified to discover no mention of himself.

Charles was a puzzle to Arthur. Withdrawn to the point of timidity, the boy rarely said a word, except in answer to a direct question. He was well-behaved and not unintelligent. He did not attend school, for the nearest one was twenty miles away, but his mother, who had spent two years in a teachers' college, tutored him evenings, and his present educational level seemed to be at about seventh grade, which was normal for his age.

What puzzled Arthur about the boy was that he seemed to have no interest in play. Like Arthur he worked from seven A.M. to five P.M., incidentally accomplishing considerably more than the new hired hand. With his evenings consumed by lessons and study, this left little time for play, but still Arthur could not understand the boy's seeming preference for work.

Both hunting and fishing, traditionally favorite pastimes of boys, were available within walking distance of the cottage. Arthur himself found time occasionally for both and met no objections from his employer, but the boy seemed not even mildly interested.

The woman puzzled him too. She was an excellent housekeeper and a wonderful cook as well as a tireless worker. She was not large, outweighing Arthur's one-hundred and thirty by not more than ten pounds, but she had the strength and endurance of a man. Yet it did not detract from her femininity, for her figure was soft and full, and her movements held a sort of earthy grace.

Her temper was even, though she was inclined to a slight briskness, and the alacrity with which Charles obeyed her every order indicated her firm belief in parental discipline. Altogether she impressed Arthur as the type of woman his mother used to describe as "an excellent catch for some lucky man," and he could not quite understand why his late partner had deserted her.

Arthur had been a hired hand three weeks when the subject of romance came up. He was rather surprised when it did, for although he admired Mrs. Conway as a housekeeper and a mother, thoughts of love had never entered his head. However, he did not sidestep it; for he was beginning to grow bored.

It came up quite casually one evening as they sat together on the porch steps after Charles had gone to bed. It was a fine moonlit evening in late July, and Arthur was smoking the second of the two cigars he allotted himself each night. He had grown accustomed to smoking on the porch, having noticed a slight frown on Mrs. Conway's face on the single occasion when he had smoked in the house. She had made no comment, but Arthur felt that as a hired hand he had no right to insist on what might be only a husband's prerogative.

"This reminds me of the first night I spent here with Charles," she said suddenly. "My husband, I mean, not the boy." She laid a hand on his arm. "Look at that moon, Arthur."

He felt a mild shock, for she had always previously addressed him as Mr. Long.

"Beautiful, isn't it—" he said, then finished deliberately—"Laura."

She gave his arm a slight squeeze, and he smiled at her. She smiled back, her strong teeth gleaming in the moonlight, and quite casually he leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

It was a brief kiss. Her lips were cool and pleasant on his, but there was no passion in them. After a moment she turned away, laughed softly, and tucked her arm under his. They sat like that, holding hands and talking unromantically of farm matters, until bedtime. As they separated in front of her bedroom, she matter-of-factly raised her lips for a goodnight kiss which was as brief as the first.

An indefinable change took place in their relationship after that. Laura went out of her way to perform little feminine services for him, such as fixing a pillow to his back and bringing him slippers once worn by her husband. He began to smoke in the house, and not only did she make no comment but no frown appeared on her face.

There was nothing coy about Laura. Sometimes her color momentarily heightened when he smiled at her, and her manner became one of familiar affection, but she continued to manage the house and the farm as briskly as ever, and their love-making did not progress beyond a regular good-night kiss.

It was, therefore, rather a violent jolt to Arthur when, after dinner one evening, she calmly asked Charles, "How would you like to have a new father?"

The boy's eyes opened in surprise, and he simply stared at her. She said sharply, "I asked a question, Charles!"

"I heard, Mother," he said quickly. "I was just surprised, kind of. Mr. Long, Mother?"

Her color heightened, and she said with a note of affected gaiety, "Have you noticed any other suitors around lately?"

"No, ma'am," Charles said. "I think it would be fine, Mother, if that's what you want."

When Charles had retired, Arthur said awkwardly, "Laura, I'm afraid maybe you misunderstood me a little. I didn't mean to give you the impression—I mean—" He floundered to a stop when he saw her regarding him with a tolerant and amused smile.

"Perhaps I was a little sudden, Arthur. But it is obviously sensible for us to get married. I know we're not in love as people are in the movies, but that kind of love is for younger people. We're both bound here to the farm. I forever, because I like it here, and you at least for a long time."

"What do you mean by that?"

She laughed softly. "I've known who you were since the first week, Arthur Little. Your picture is on a reward notice in the Three Corners post office."

He felt the hair rise along the back of his neck, and the sense of security into which he had been lulled evaporated all at once. When she saw how pale he had turned, she crossed the room and laid a commiserating hand on his arm.

"Don't misunderstand me, Arthur," she said gently. "I'm not blackmailing you into marriage. You're free to leave at any time, and no one will ever learn from me you were here. But where would you go? Those pictures must be everywhere if they have one in a small place like Three Corners."

He shook his head hopelessly.

"You're also free to remain on just as a hired hand if you wish. But both of us are lonely, and we need each other's love."

Gradually the panic in him subsided. Thoughtfully he puffed his cigar and examined his slippers feet. There was sense in her reasoning. She would make a pleasant, if not an exciting wife, and marriage might at least relieve the tedium of simply waiting. A year, perhaps two, he must remain here in order to be reasonably safe, and it would certainly be pleasanter to remain as head of the house than as a mere hired hand.

"Do you know why I'm wanted?" he asked finally.

"For murder and embezzlement."

Fleeting he wondered what she would say if he told her the man he had murdered was her husband. Then he pushed the thought aside as immaterial.

"Aren't you afraid I might murder you in your sleep?"

She laughed aloud. "I know you very well, Arthur. If you really killed anyone, it was an accident. Too often I've watched you try to kill a chicken to believe you capable of killing a human."

In this she was probably right, Arthur thought ruefully. He *had* killed a human in a moment of hysteria, and under circumstances which at the time seemed to involve no risk, but he knew within himself that no combination of circumstances could ever again bring him to such an act, regardless of provocation.

"How are we going to get married, anyway?" he asked. "Whoever married us might recognize me."

"You don't realize how much farm work has altered your appearance," she assured him. "You are brown as a nut and ten pounds heavier than when you arrived. And with that long hair, bleached by the sun as it is, you look like a typical farmer. You might be recognized if you walked around the streets of a city for a time, but I think we can risk the justice of the peace I have in mind. Both he and his wife are nearly blind." She added casually, "I got the license in Fort Collins last week when I was gone so long on my shopping trip."

He laughed then, and the matter was settled.

They were married the following Friday by the half-blind justice of the peace on the outskirts of Fort Collins. With her usual efficiency Laura combined the event with her weekly shopping tour and drove to the Fort Collins shopping district immediately after the wedding.

She stopped first at a grocery and meat market. Arthur stayed in the car, not wishing to chance recognition, but through the glass show window he could see Laura inside the store. Idly he followed her progress from counter to counter as she filled a self-service pushcart. When she reached the cash register, she was facing directly toward him since the girl cashier was situated with her back toward the window.

What brought about the disagreement, Arthur was unable to tell, but apparently something the cashier did or said offended Laura. One moment her face contained its usual firm but pleasant expression, but the next it was a mask of fury. Her lips twisted as she uttered short, staccato

phrases Arthur could not hear, and the girl cashier recoiled against the show window as though she had been slapped. Then Laura swept up her package and strode from the store.

When she opened the door on the driver's side of the station wagon, her face was brick red, and her lips formed a thin white line. Dumping her carton of groceries in the rear, she slammed shut the door and backed from the parking place with a vicious jerk. Immediately she swung back in the direction of the mountains, abandoning further shopping.

Too startled even to comment, Arthur simply sat with his feet braced and his eyes glued to the road as the station wagon hit seventy and stayed there. Ten miles from town Laura relaxed and let the speed drop to fifty. Arthur risked a glance at his bride.

"What, my dear wife, is eating you?" he asked quizzically.

She glanced at him sidewise with a half shame-faced expression. "I'm sorry, dear. I don't often lose my temper. But I can't stand anyone to condescend to me."

He waited for further explanation, but another mile went by, and then all she said was, "That's why I love the farm so, Arthur. In town, you are just one of thousands of nonentities, constantly ordered around by arrogant, self-appointed superiors. But on the farm I am queen. If any orders are given, *I* give them."

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said with mock subservience.

She lifted her eyes from the road long enough to grin at him. "I didn't mean to show my temper until the honeymoon was over, dear. I'll make it up. We're going to have a three-day honeymoon."

"Where?"

"At the farm, of course. We'll do only necessary chores and the rest of the time just relax and hold hands."

"Why three days, particularly?" he asked.

"Isn't that enough?"

"Oh, yes. I'm not objecting. But the way you expressed it sounded so—well, precise. Couldn't you have said, 'A few days,' or 'A day or two,' so that it wouldn't sound so much like an army leave?"

She laughed a trifle uncertainly. "I can't help being precise, Arthur. It's a quality you'll have to learn to tolerate."

She kept her word about the honeymoon. Aside from milking, feeding the chickens, and a few other necessary daily chores, all work which could not be done by the already busy Charles was simply allowed to

slide for three days. During this period, Laura pampered the bridegroom like a fowl being fattened for Thanksgiving. In fact, she was such a model of attentiveness and affection that Arthur almost began to believe he *was* mildly in love with her.

On the third evening the honeymoon abruptly ended. Unmistakably.

The first intimation came as Charles and Arthur were bedding down the cows for the night. A yellow jacket suddenly droned through the open barn door and stung Charles on the shoulder.

"Ow!" yelled Charles as much in surprise as in pain.

His face dead white, the boy rapidly unbuttoned his shirt, slipped it off one shoulder, and vainly tried to peer at the hurt, jumping up and down and whimpering with pain all the time.

"Here, let me see it," Arthur said, stepping behind him and jerking the sleeve the rest of the way down.

But Arthur's eyes never touched the swelling mark left by the yellow jacket. Instead they fixed with shocked fascination on the boy's back. From shoulders to waist it was crisscrossed with the permanently ridged scars of countless floggings.

Jerking from Arthur's grip, the boy swung about and began buttoning his shirt, his pain forgotten in a new terror which suddenly showed in his eyes. When he saw Arthur's fixed, unbelieving expression, he sank to his knees.

"You won't tell her you saw!" he whispered. "Please, Uncle Arthur. You won't tell her you saw!"

Arthur shook his head dumbly. "Get up, Charles," he finally managed to say. "I won't tell."

He stayed out in the barn another fifteen minutes after Charles had gone in, until he judged Laura had had time to treat the boy's sting. Even then he did not re-enter the house but sat on the porch, smoking a cigar and listening to Laura finish the dinner dishes she had started when he and Charles went after the cows. Finally she came out and sat beside him.

"Tomorrow we start back to work, dear," she said abruptly.

He continued to puff his cigar without replying.

"We'll start on the outhouses," she said. "They need paint terribly. You should be able to complete them in a week."

His mind still on Charles's scarred back, he said detachedly, "Shouldn't take more than three days."

"Oh no. Not at three hours a day."

He turned to examine her curiously and forced lightness into his voice. "Three hours? Is that a new union rule? I've been accustomed to seven A.M. to five P.M."

"I mean evenings, silly. There's too much regular work to cut in on your daytimes. With daylight saving it stays light till nearly nine."

His expression became astonished. "You mean after working ten hours, with only a half hour for lunch, you expect me to work three more hours?"

"Of course," she said briskly, as though the question were of no consequence. "We've so many things to accomplish, dear. And our honeymoon is over, you know. The fences all need repair, and the machinery needs a good going over. But the biggest problem is all that land lying idle.

"I guess I never mentioned it, but that two-hundred acre wooded section beyond the south fence belongs to the farm, too. It should be in crops, but the land has to be cleared first and all the rocks dug up. It will take two years of hard work to get it in shape for planting."

"Hard work by whom?"

"You and I, dear. I wouldn't ask you to work any harder than I intend to myself."

She rose and entered the house while his mouth was still hanging open.

It took nearly five minutes for his surprise to evolve into indignation. Then he rose and strode into the house, slamming the screen door behind him. He found her in the kitchen, facing the door and awaiting him with an expectant light in her eyes.

Before he could speak, she said, "I've sent Charles down to the barn."

The statement disconcerted him. "Why?" he asked.

"Because I didn't want him to hear, dear."

"Hear what?"

"Our conversation. Didn't you have something to say, dear?"

"You're damned right!" Arthur said hotly. "If you think I'm working my head off the way you've got it figured—"

Abruptly she broke in. "This time I'm excusing you, Arthur. But don't ever use that tone to me again. You may as well understand once and for all that this is *my* farm. *My* farm, not *our* farm. I've wrested this place from soil and rocks with my bare hands, and it's *mine*. I am queen here, and this farm is my private domain. There is no room for two rulers. And before I forget it, you are no longer to smoke in the house."

Before his astonished eyes her face took on the same expression of fury he had witnessed through the store window. But instead of the blistering invective he instinctively braced himself for, her voice came as cool and precise as an army colonel's, and its effect was as overpowering.

"You've had your honeymoon, Arthur. And in the event you don't like future arrangements, please reflect on the alternative before deciding to move on. I believe in permanent marriage and the assurance I gave you that you were free to leave no longer holds. If you ever leave here, it will only be to be hanged, for within the short time it takes me to get to Three Corners after you leave, the police will know who you are. There is only one key to the station wagon, and it will remain in my possession at all times."

She took a step toward him, and he retreated just as the girl cashier had. "I am a fair woman, Arthur, but I will not tolerate disobedience. I will have it completely and immediately. Now go down to the barn and get Charles!"

He drew himself erect, trying to muster some small part of his shattered dignity.

"I mean now!" she snapped.

His body jerked as though she had cracked a whip, and he sidled from the kitchen door.

A few feet from the house he stopped to stare about him with a brand new sense of perception. The valley seemed smaller, somehow, than when he had entered it, and even as he swung his gaze to the four mountains hemming it in, they seemed to be closing in on him like the sides of a shrinking box. With horror and belated understanding he realized that he was the victim of his dead partner's last practical joke.

At a slight noise behind him he turned and saw Laura standing in the kitchen doorway. Her face was expressionless, but her eyes bored into his with almost physical force.

He began to run toward the barn.



Kasch For Your Clothes

by Fred S. Tobey

When Coldren Kasch was nine, he asked his grandfather why he had chosen the junk business as a career. The grandfather, who took children's questions seriously, replied that although it was not the most exciting way to make money, he found it reliable. "There are plenty of ways to get rich in a hurry," he said, "but they tend to be risky."

Old Mr. Kasch, who in his youth had been a penniless immigrant, left a modest fortune to his son when he died. The son, Coldren's father, set out to multiply it in the stock market, but unhappily the market did not cooperate, and in the course of a few months most of the inheritance had slipped down the drain.

Coldren was told that he must leave college and go to work.

Going to work proved to be more easily said than done. Plants in and around Los Angeles were laying off people that season, not hiring them. After many rejections, Coldren thought of his grandfather's words and came to a decision: He would go into the old-clothes business.

His forebear had started as a simple ragpicker, but Coldren, the college dropout, was more sophisticated about it—even to the extent of a bit of leavening humor. On the used panel truck that he bought with borrowed money he had the name "Kasch" painted in bold capitals, and underneath, in script, "For Your Clothes." In this vehicle he toured Los Angeles, and he picked up some bargains. When he had enough merchandise, he rented a small store in the city and offered the goods for sale. The words, "Kasch—For Your Clothes" went on the storefront, too, and in due course the phrase came to be something of a byword. Coldren ventured to sew a label into some of the better garments. "Kasch," the label said. "Clothes with a History." There were movie stars in Los Angeles, weren't there? Who was to say the garments had not been theirs?

At the end of five years Coldren was doing quite well, but he had not become rich.

One day the colorful little truck (now a new one), with "Kasch For Your Clothes" on its side, was halted in midtraffic, a couple of blocks off Sunset Boulevard, by a city vehicle repairing a damaged light pole. As Coldren, who was at the wheel, waited in bored resignation, he heard someone calling. Turning his head, he saw a pretty girl leaning out the window of a ground-floor apartment, swinging a man's jacket in her hand.

"You want this, Kasch?" she called.

Coldren shut off the engine and walked over. The jacket, he now saw, was shoddy though not very old, and he observed that at close range the same might be said of the pretty girl. The neighborhood was familiar to him, and Coldren correctly judged her to be a practitioner of the oldest profession.

"What'll you give me for this?" she asked.

Coldren took the jacket from her hand. He pursed his lips. "I couldn't give much. Three dollars."

"Three dollars! Come on, this is all the so-and-so left me when he split last night. I'd like to get my fingernails into him."

"Four," said Coldren. "It's a cheap garment, that's more than I should give."

"Well, I suppose four bucks is better than nothing. You want to come in and talk about it?"

The city vehicle had moved, and cars behind Coldren's truck were honking.

"Sorry, I've got to run," he said. He quickly handed the girl four one-dollar bills, and hurried off with the jacket.

Now, Coldren never sent a newly acquired garment out for cleaning without first examining it to see if something might be concealed in the lining. In five years he had not salvaged very much, but he found the discoveries exciting, such as they were. Twice there had been good-luck pieces of no cash value, once a gold coin. Most commonly, when he found anything, it would be a five- or a ten-dollar bill, which he assumed had been sewn into the lining by a fond wife or mother, against the danger of robbery or personal indiscretion.

In the jacket just purchased he found something quite different—a key, of a most interesting sort, and in an odd place.

The key had been pushed into the padding of the shoulder from the inside, through a slit that seemed to have been made for the purpose. Coldren almost missed it, because he did not generally examine the

shoulders, but this key was a rather bulky one, and his fingers, wandering over the garment, sensed something not quite normal.

Coldren had had a key like this in his possession not long before, when he had checked some parcels for an hour or so at Los Angeles International Airport: It had a round stem, and a number was stamped on it in large figures. Certainly a locker key, he decided, but from the airport or from somewhere else? No doubt bus stations had similar lockers.

But why go to such pains to conceal it? People didn't generally leave things in public lockers very long, because someone comes and empties them when the time expires. Coldren seemed to remember that a single coin was good for only twenty-four hours.

Someone must have wanted that key out of the way in case he were searched, reflected Coldren, and if that were so, it must represent something quite valuable.

Standing alone in the back room of his store, the locker key in one hand and the jacket dangling from the other, the used-clothing merchant let his imagination roam. He had read of a jewel theft in the city the day before; didn't thieves sometimes use parcel lockers as temporary hiding places for their loot? Yes, he had seen that on television. There had been a bank robbery, too, in the last day or so, he recalled. Could the key in his hand be the open sesame to a fortune in bank notes?

Ah, but if this were the key to such valuables, mused he, would the owner of the jacket willingly have left it at the girl's apartment? Hardly. Suppose, then, the girl was lying. Had her visitor been a victim of violence, and was she trying to get rid of all the evidences of his visit?

Coldren's imagination was now in full gallop. He saw a weighted body being dumped off a bridge into the water, heard the girl, returning to her apartment, exclaim in annoyance at the sight of the overlooked jacket. How to get rid of it? Certainly not in the rubbish, where it might be discovered. What better way than to sell it to Kasch, whose truck chanced to have stopped outside the window at the very moment?

Now, if there had been violence, didn't that make it even more likely that whatever was in the locker was worth a great deal? How much time was there? Coldren put the key into his pocket, told his assistant he would be gone for an hour or so, and hurried out to his panel truck.

When he returned to his store he found his assistant awaiting him anxiously. A girl had called in his absence, looking for a jacket she said she had sold to the driver of the Kasch truck only that morning. It was

most important, she said, that she get the jacket back, and as soon as possible. The assistant had lied to her, saying that Mr. Kasch was out with the truck, and that nothing had yet been removed from it that day. After all, what did he know of Mr. Kasch's intentions regarding the jacket? He had preferred not to take the responsibility of letting the girl rummage through the back room to find it. In an hour or so, he had told her, Mr. Kasch would be back with the truck. Could she return then?

The girl said she would come back. She had appeared quite agitated, and when the assistant looked out the window after her, he saw her get into a car containing two men. Some sort of altercation ensued, and presently one of the men got out of the car and started toward the store. The second man jumped out and seized him by the arm. A brief argument followed, then the two men rejoined the girl in the car and drove away.

The assistant had not liked the looks of the two men, not a bit. "If they're still with that girl when she comes back," he said, "I think you ought to watch your step."

Coldren said he thought so, too. He went into his office, closed the door, and picked up the telephone, glancing at his wall clock as he did so. It was just three o'clock.

At four the girl returned, and her two companions were still in attendance. One of them came into the store with her; the other stayed at the wheel of the car. Coldren had to agree with his assistant that the girl's escort had the appearance of someone you would not care to meet in a dark alley.

Did Mr. Kasch have the jacket she had sold him that morning, the girl asked? Coldren said he did indeed. He opened a closet, took the garment from a hook, and laid it on the counter. The girl looked relieved.

"Yes, yes, that's it!" she said. "I'll buy it back from you." She took a purse from her handbag, extracted four dollars, and offered it to Coldren.

"It will be ten dollars," said Coldren.

"Ten! But you only paid me—"

Her companion spoke up, and his voice was like gravel rolling off a dump truck. "Pay him!" he said.

Without another word, she handed Coldren a ten-dollar bill. Her companion picked up the jacket, fingered it briefly, and seemed satisfied. The pair turned and hurried out of the store.

"I feel quite sure they will not be back," said Coldren to his assistant, turning down the wall thermostat and turning off lights, "but just the

same I think you and I had better close up shop and take the rest of the day off."

At police headquarters the next day, Coldren sat talking with Detective Lieutenant Carlson.

"I'm sorry I couldn't say much last night when you phoned," said the lieutenant. "We had some angles to check out first. I did tell you we followed the men and the girl to the locker, from your place."

"Yes—it was a smart idea of yours, rushing the key back to me and having me put it back in the jacket."

"Well, as things turned out it made some arrests possible, and it saved time. There are a lot of places in the city where a key like that could fit a locker. When you phoned us that the people were trying to get the jacket back, we figured the quickest thing would be just to follow them."

"Don't keep me in suspense, Lieutenant. Where did they go?"

"L.A. International Airport."

Coldren groaned. "The very place I would have gone if I had not decided to take the key to the police instead. So what was in the locker?"

"An attaché case. When they got back to the car with it from the lockers, we approached them and they tried to run. That gave us the excuse we needed to pick them up. There was a fortune in that attaché case, all right, Mr. Kasch, but it wasn't money or jewels, as you imagined. We found more than half a million dollars' worth of heroin."

"Heroin?" Coldren turned the implications over in his mind. "Then why was that guy crazy enough to leave his jacket at the girl's place with the locker key hidden in it?"

The lieutenant chuckled. "He didn't have any choice, Mr. Kasch. He's a small-time dealer known as Smokey Sam, and he'd hijacked the shipment and hidden it in the locker. He was waiting in the airport parking lot when the messenger, who had flown out in the morning to get the stuff, got back to his car about dusk. Smokey had pulled a very old trick, but it worked—he had let the air out of a front tire. While the messenger was changing the wheel, he knocked him out and grabbed the case. He thought he was smart to duck back into the airport building and put it in a locker, so he could show up right away in his usual spots and seem perfectly clean."

"The messenger must have caught a glimpse of him, though, because they went through Smokey's apartment like a wrecking crew. When they didn't find anything they put a tail on him, hoping he'd lead them to the

place where he'd hidden the case. "Smokey didn't know they'd pulled his apartment to pieces, and he felt like celebrating. He let the girl pick him up and take him to her place."

"The girl I bought the jacket from?"

"That's the girl. After they'd been there a while she talked him into an all-night stand, and he went out to get a bottle. She was sure he'd come back, because he left his jacket."

"So what happened to him?"

"The boss was tired of waiting, and the two goons who were tailing Smokey grabbed him when he came out. If they remembered that he'd had a jacket, they didn't think it was important. They worked him over the rest of the night, and some time in the morning he broke down and told them about the key hidden in the shoulder padding. They got hold of the girl, but by then the jacket was gone and they had to take her to your place to get it back."

"Everybody is safely in jail, I hope?"

"Well, the pair we nabbed at the airport are, and we may get more. Smokey Sam is in the hospital. If he lives, he won't be doing any pushing for a while. The girl is in the clear—she had nothing to do with the junk."

"Junk!" Coldren exclaimed. "Ah, of course, there is junk and there is 'junk,' isn't there? In my business, a fortune in junk does not fit into a briefcase. But at least I made a good profit on the jacket—one hundred and fifty per cent on my investment, and a quick turnover. Who knows what that other 'junk' would have got me?" he queried.

"You can be pretty sure it would have got you some extra holes in your head," said Lieutenant Carlson. "If you want to feel glad you brought us that key, visit the hospital and take a look at what's left of Smokey Sam. One thing puzzles me, though, Mr. Kasch. How come you *were* smart enough not to go hunting for that locker yourself? You guessed right that it was at the airport, and you were pretty sure there was something valuable involved."

Coldren thought a moment.

"I guess my late grandfather should get the credit," he said.

"How is that?"

"When I was a small boy," said Coldren, "he told me, 'There are plenty of ways to get rich in a hurry, but they tend to be risky.'"

One Way Out

by Clark Howard

Despite his loss of blood, first from the wound in his side, and then from the emergency operation to get the bullet out, Gerald Walsh's face, instead of being pale, was flushed with hot, dry fever. His body was limp, still painless from the anesthetic. Although his mental capacities felt tired and somewhat fuzzy, he was still aware of what was going on around him, and he was still certain he could handle himself all right.

"Who was with you on the holdup, Gerry?" a voice asked from somewhere above his bed. Walsh forced a grin without opening his eyes. He had his answer ready.

"Jesse James," he replied as lightly as his dry mouth would permit.

"We want your partner, Gerry," another voice said. "Tell us where he went."

Walsh did not answer. He forced his heavy eyelids half open and looked up at the ring of faces peering down at him. The two cops had on hats and overcoats. One of them had a fat face. Walsh had seen him around but could not recall his name. The other he knew; Tevell, a captain from downtown. The rest of the people were strangers; doctors and nurses, he guessed, all wearing white. One of the nurses was a redhead with nice eyes, nice lips, nice everything, at least from the waist up. The other was plain-faced, doughy looking, homely. Walsh closed his eyes again and concentrated on a picture of the redhead.

"We'll want to move him to the jail hospital right away," he heard Tevell say.

"Can't be done," a voice told the captain.

"Doctor," Tevell's voice was flat, firm, "this man killed a policeman a few hours ago. I want him behind bars."

"You move him now," the doctor said, "and the only place you'll be able to put him will be in a coffin. He'll hemorrhage and die."

Walsh's mind fought through the haze around it to listen more closely.

So I'm in a private hospital, he thought. Very interesting. He forced himself to stay awake but did not open his eyes. After a moment he heard Tevell sigh heavily.

"How long before he can be moved without it killing him?"

"That's hard to say. The danger of internal disorder usually passes as the post-surgery fever drops back to normal. He's running a hundred and two right now. It'll have to come down gradually; his system won't take fever depressants for awhile. It might be a week, might be ten days."

"Aside from the fever," Tevell wanted to know, "what's his physical condition?"

"Pretty good. Very good in fact. The bullet went in above the hipbone and below the lower rib ridge. It couldn't have been more perfectly placed, from a medical standpoint, that is. Didn't even disturb the appendix. Came out the back well clear of the pelvic girdle and spine. Minimum tissue damage all the way around. Repair will be good, recovery quick. He should even be able to walk a little by next week. The only thing we have to wait out is that fever."

Walsh smiled inwardly. Walk in one week, that's good. That's nice. Because if I can walk, it won't be long before I can run.

"All right, Doctor," Tevell said grudgingly. "We'll leave him here until you say move him. His staying, however, is going to entail our taking some necessary security precautions. We'll want to put steel grilles on the insides of both windows, and there will have to be two guards here around the clock. In addition, we're going to have to request that one of the nurses be assigned exclusively to this room and that all other hospital people—excluding yourself, of course—be kept out."

"I can understand the guards and the special nurse, Captain," the doctor said. "But are the steel grilles really necessary? Surely you don't expect him to jump out a fifth story window?"

"No more than we expect his partner to come through the window after him," Tevell admitted, "but anything is possible when you deal with people like this. I can get a court order, if it'll make you feel any better about it."

The doctor sighed wearily. "No, don't trouble. Go ahead with whatever you think necessary."

Walsh heard footsteps as the people around his bed moved slowly away. He strained to hear as their voices grew fainter.

"What about the private nurse?" Tevell asked.

"Miss Hatch, here, is a resident," the doctor said. "I can assign her to the room."

Walsh smiled inwardly, wondering if Miss Hatch was the well-built one with the red hair. The voices in the room dissolved completely then and silence settled heavily over Walsh. He opened his eyes once, looked at everything he could see without moving his head, then closed them again. A warmth began to creep upward into his head and a few moments later he was floating off into the void of drugged sleep.

A cool hand was holding his wrist the next time Walsh awoke. Opening his eyes a crack, he saw the homely nurse who had been in the room the night before: She was taking his pulse, studying her wristwatch as she mentally recorded each beat. An identification badge pinned to her uniform read, Alma Hatch, R. N.

Just my lousy luck, Walsh cursed to himself. He wouldn't be getting the redhead after all.

"Well, I see you're awake," she said before Walsh could close his eyes again. "Good, I want to take your temperature."

She put a thermometer under his tongue and began writing on a medical chart while she waited. Walsh studied her closely. She was, as he had noticed the first time, an extremely plain girl. Her complexion was pasty, like stale dough on a baker's table, and her lips were too large for her face. There was no life in either her eyes or hair, the former being dull, the latter thin and colorless. She looked to be about twenty-seven. Walsh noticed that she wore no wedding ring.

"All right," she said, taking the thermometer from his mouth, "let's see." She held the instrument at eye level, turning it slowly to find the mercury. "Hundred and one, point four," she announced. "Not bad, down more than half a degree. How do you feel?"

"Sick," Walsh said thickly. "Sick and hot and hungry."

"Does your side hurt, where the wound is?"

Walsh shook his head slightly. "No."

"All right, the doctor left some medication for your nausea. I'll give you that, and in a little while I'll feed you some broth." She turned and started away.

"Wait," Walsh said softly. Alma Hatch paused and turned back.

"Yes?"

"Hold my hand for a minute."

"What?" She frowned, looking incredulous.

"Please," Walsh said, "just for a minute. Please."

Alma Hatch blushed slightly. She parted her lips, about to refuse, then glanced across the room at the uniformed police guard. He was reading the paper, paying no attention to them. Hesitantly, still blushing, she reached out and took Walsh's hand. He gripped her fingers gently and forced a weak smile.

"Thanks," he said after a moment. Then he closed his eyes.

Alma Hatch did not reply. She turned away to go for his medicine.

The next morning, while his head was propped up and she was feeding him cream of rice cereal, Walsh apologized to Alma Hatch.

"I didn't mean to seem fresh," he said sheepishly. "It's just that you remind me of a girl I used to know." His face took on a sad expression. "She was kind of special to me," he added quietly.

Alma Hatch studied him curiously for a moment, looking at his dark, wavy hair, his finely-cut, handsome face. Her too-large lips parted slightly in obvious disbelief at what he had just told her.

"What's the matter?" Walsh asked her.

"Nothing," she answered in a cool voice. "It just seems a little far-fetched that you would have been—well, attracted to a girl who resembles me."

"Why do you say that?" Walsh asked in mild astonishment.

"Well, I'm not blind, you know." Her voice grew cooler with every word. "I'm fully aware of how I look."

"What's the matter with the way you look?" Walsh made his tone slightly indignant, but kept his voice down so the guard would not hear. "Listen," he went on, "don't think you're not pretty just because you don't wear a lot of lipstick and paint your eyes blue and dye your hair six different colors. A lot of guys like girls that keep their natural beauty, and I happen to be one of them. Not everybody goes for flashy dames; you know."

"Well, I certainly never thought of myself as having 'natural beauty' before," Alma Hatch said. Her voice was still not friendly but some of its coolness had disappeared.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself then," Walsh told her flatly. "I'll admit you're no Miss America, but you're still a very pretty girl." He put his head down abruptly. "I don't want any more," he said impatiently, closing his eyes.

Alma Hatch stood for a moment holding a spoonful of cereal she had

been about to put to his lips. When she saw that he did not intend to eat any more, and apparently did not want to talk to her any further, she put the spoon back in the bowl and silently went away.

Walsh smiled after she had gone. Two points, he thought. Now she owes me an apology.

"I was rude to you yesterday," Alma said quietly the next morning, as Walsh lay with the thermometer in his mouth. "You were trying to be nice to me and I was very impolite. I'm sorry." She took the thermometer from his mouth and held it up to read.

"Forget it," Walsh said easily. "I wasn't exactly trying to be nice to you; I mean, not like I was forcing myself to be nice. I was just paying you a compliment, is all. Sometimes I'm a little clumsy with words."

"Oh, I don't think you are at all," she said quickly. "I think you speak very well."

"Now who's trying to be nice?" he chided gently. He watched her record his temperature on the chart. "What is it today?" he asked casually.

"One hundred, point two," she told him. They both felt drawn at that moment to look across the room at the silent, ever-present guard, who, as usual, was paying no attention to them. Then Alma Hatch turned back to look at Walsh. She stared intently at him for what seemed like a long time. Walsh returned her fixed stare, seeing in her eyes now the sympathy he had been hoping for, working toward, counting on. She's falling for it, the wounded man thought. She's buying it.

"It'll still be a few days," she told him quietly, "maybe another week. When it gets below a hundred, it will drop very slowly."

"Sure," Walsh said, making his voice sound very flat and hopeless.

Alma Hatch bit her lower lip in a brief moment of frustration and uncertainty, then took the medical chart and left the room. Walsh grinned.

A while later the guard got up from his chair just inside the door and stepped out into the hall. Raising on one elbow, Walsh could see him talking to a second uniformed officer who was stationed outside. Walsh wet his dry lips and looked around the room. Both windows had heavy steel grilles locked into place on the inside. One way out, Walsh thought. The door. Then the hallway. Elevator next, or stairs. Then the street. One way, just one way out.

So that's how it'll have to be, he decided.

He was able to sit up the next evening and partially feed himself supper,

with Alma's help. When he had finished, Alma gave him a cigarette and lighted it for him.

"Thanks," he said, smiling. "That sure tastes good." She gave him a half-smile in return, and began stacking the few dishes on a tray. Walsh glanced over at the door and saw that the guard was out in the hall again. He reached out and took Alma's hand.

"I want to tell you something," he said urgently. "I want you to know that I didn't kill that policeman. How can I convince you?"

"I don't want to talk about that," Alma said quickly. She pulled her hand away, but Walsh instantly grabbed it again.

"Alma, please," he pleaded, "you've got to listen! It's very important to me that you understand. I don't care what anybody else thinks, but with you it's different."

"Different?" She stared at him for a moment, no longer trying to pull away. "What do you mean, different? I'm nobody to you."

"You are, Alma, you are," Walsh insisted. "Listen, I don't expect you to feel the same way about me, I know you couldn't—"

Alma Hatch's hand suddenly tightened in his until it was she who was doing the holding. "Feel how?" she whispered. "Tell me what you mean."

Walsh lowered his eyes to avoid looking at her. "I—I think I've fallen in love with you."

Alma Hatch parted her lips to speak but no words came. She put the back of one hand to her mouth for a moment, then squeezed Walsh's hand briefly and turned quickly away from his bed. Picking up the tray of dishes, she hurried from the room.

Walsh sighed heavily and took a final drag on his cigarette. So far, so good, he thought. Glancing at the door, he saw that the two guards were still idly talking in the corridor. Quickly he flipped back the sheet and sat up straight. Carefully moving his legs over the side of the bed, he held one hand over his bandaged wound and slowly stood up. His body was stiff and weak, and a wave of nausea flooded over him for a few seconds; but he braced himself with his free hand and held on until the feeling passed. Then he was able to take a few short steps to the end of the bed and back.

In bed again, he was sweaty and out of breath, but now he had found out just how much strength he had, and now he knew just how much work he had to do. He decided to start exercising his legs and arms that night, as soon as the lights went out.

Tevell came to see him the next afternoon.

"How are you, killer?" the police captain asked in a level, professional voice.

"I'll live," Walsh said.

Tevell grunted loudly. "Not for long you won't. A year from now, after a trial and an appeal and all the rest of the rigmarole, they'll be strapping you in the electric chair. Unless you're smart, that is."

Here it comes, Walsh thought knowingly. The old you-help-us-and-we'll-help-you bit.

"Well, tell me, Captain," Walsh said with mock interest, "what do I have to do to be smart?"

"Just give us an address. The address where Cappo is hiding out."

Walsh knit his brow in feigned bewilderment. "Who?"

"Cappo," the policeman repeated, "George Cappo. You remember him. He was your partner on the stickup, the one who put three of those five bullets into the officer you two murdered."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Walsh said tightly.

"We already checked," Tevell said, "so save your lies. You and Cappo have been thick for two or three months. You've been going to the races together, shooting pool together, night clubbing all over town together. Then you and another guy pull a loan company heist, and now all of a sudden Cappo has dropped out of sight. We can put two and two together, kid."

"Three cheers for you," said Walsh.

"The way it stands now," Tevell continued, "you can clam up and go straight to the chair. We'll still catch Cappo sooner or later. Or you can play it smart, tell us where he is, turn state's evidence at the trial, and come out of it with a life sentence that will get you a parole in fifteen or twenty years. You're still young yet, kid. Staying alive is something to think about." Tevell leaned back in his chair and took a cigar from his breast pocket. He slipped off the cellophane wrapper, put the cigar in the middle of his mouth and lighted it. After several preliminary puffs he shifted it over to one corner of his mouth and talked around it. "Come on, Gerry," he prodded, "tell me where Cappo is."

"He took a slow boat to China," Walsh said, curling his lips into a sneer. Tevell sighed heavily and shrugged his shoulders.

"Some people," he observed patiently, "just have to do it the hard way. Okay, kid," he got up to leave. "See you in the death house."

After the policeman left, Gerry Walsh lay back in bed, pale and cold in spite of his fever, thinking thoughts of the electric chair.

"What can I do to help you?" Alma whispered to him that night as he ate supper. Walsh's heart skipped a beat at the sound of the words he had been waiting to hear. This is the beginning of it, he thought. My one way out.

"What do you mean?" he asked her in a controlled voice.

"I can't let them take you to jail," she said, "now that we feel the way we do about each other." She slipped her hand over his and held it firmly and reassuringly.

"I don't want you to get involved, Alma," Walsh said with forced sincerity.

"But I am involved. I became involved the moment you said you loved me. You've got to let me help you. There must be something I can do."

"I—I don't know," he said hesitantly. "I haven't thought about you helping me. If I had a few more days here, maybe I could figure out something."

"I can have you kept here," she told him quickly. "I can indicate on your chart that your fever is still high. The doctor never checks it himself. And I know he won't give permission for you to be moved until your temperature is normal again."

"I never thought of that," Walsh lied. "Are you sure you can get away with it?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "I'm sure. Maybe in those few days we can think of a way for you to get out."

"Alma," Walsh said, looking at her balefully, "if we do find a way, will you come with me? We could go away somewhere, make a new start—"

"Are you sure you'd want me to?" she asked, her voice almost pathetic in tone. "I know I'm not pretty, no matter what you told me, and I'm not very smart, except about nursing."

"I want you to, Alma," he assured her. "I wouldn't go without you."

Alma gave his hand a final squeeze and smiled. "I'll go," she said happily.

During the next four days Walsh laid the mental and physical groundwork of his escape plan. Giving Alma a list of sizes, he instructed her to buy him a complete set of clothing. She was to keep the things in her car on the staff parking lot and smuggle them into her hospital locker, one article at a time. He also told her to get a small supply of whatever

medicines he would need, once he was out of the hospital. This she was to keep in a kit in her glove compartment.

At night when the lights were out, while the two police guards passed their monotonous watches talking in the corridor, Walsh would be awake; exercising his legs, flexing his arm muscles, standing next to the bed for long periods of time in order to regain his equilibrium. In addition to building up his strength in this fashion, Alma was secretly giving him daily injections of high potency vitamins.

Folded in a newspaper, Alma slipped him a typewritten schedule of all hospital personnel on duty on the fifth floor between ten P.M., when the lights were turned off, and six o'clock the next morning when the day shift came on.

And, most importantly of all, he had Alma start bringing each of the two night guards a cup of coffee around midnight.

On the fifth day Alma put a fresh dressing on his wound. "How does it look?" he asked her.

"Good," she said. "All the secondary tissue has closed and the epidermis, the upper layer, is already forming."

"Can I walk all right?"

Alma nodded. "As long as you move slowly and don't bump anything or slip. Do you think you're strong enough?"

"I'm strong enough," he assured. "We'll go tonight then, if you can manage to serve our friends in blue some special coffee. What are you going to give them, anyway?"

"Cobazine. It's tasteless and dissolves completely in liquid. I'll give them enough for about five hours."

"Good. No one else will be on duty tonight?"

She shook her head. "Not in this corridor."

"Okay. You're sure everything else is set? My clothes all in your locker? The car got plenty of gas?"

"Yes, yes, everything just like you said." Alma bit her lower lip slightly and stared at Walsh for a long moment. "I haven't asked before," she said quietly, "but what's going to happen to us after tonight? Where will we go, what will we do?"

Walsh spread his lips into a personable smile and reached out for her hand. "We'll hide out for awhile until I get good and well, then we'll go away together. We'll move somewhere far away, where nobody will know us. We'll make a new start together, just you and me."

"Do you really mean it, Gerry?" she asked. "You wouldn't just say those things, would you, just so I'd help you?"

"Alma, honey," Walsh spoke softly, squeezing her hand, "I love you, please believe me. All I want is to be with you." He put a pained expression on his face. "Why, you don't think I could lie about a thing like that?"

"All right, Gerry," she interrupted. "All right. I believe you."

"Tonight then?"

She nodded. "Tonight."

Walsh winked at her, grinning. "That's my girl."

Thirty minutes after midnight Alma came into the room, past the two heavily sleeping guards, and gave Walsh his new clothes.

"Are you sure they're both out good?" he asked anxiously, as she helped him into a shirt.

"Yes, I'm sure. They won't wake up until four or five o'clock."

"Okay. Come on, hurry."

When he was dressed, he put one arm around Alma's shoulder and they started out into the hall. As they passed the inside guard, slumped down low in his chair, arms hanging limply to the floor, Walsh stopped.

"Just a second—" He flipped open the grip strap of the guard's holster and removed the heavy regulation revolver from its leather nest. "Just in case," he said easily, shoving the weapon under his belt. Alma looked at the gun a little fearfully but said nothing. Slipping her arm around his waist again, she helped him out into the corridor.

They used the food service elevator to go down to the deserted hospital kitchen, and from there Alma guided him out the receiving entrance to a small loading dock at the rear of the building. They moved quickly at first, then slowed down as Walsh tired and began to sweat from the now unfamiliar exertion of walking. Luckily, they met no one in the quiet night recesses of the sleeping hospital, and after several pauses to let Walsh rest, they finally negotiated the loading dock steps, and the personnel parking lot, and reached Alma's car.

"You're shivering," Alma said. "I've got a blanket in the back seat."

"Forget it," he snapped. "Come on, drive." Walsh slumped in the seat, leaning against the car door. Alma saw that he had one hand on the gun in his belt. She bit her lip nervously and started the car.

Walsh showed her the way to go, directing her first down one street, then another, almost snarling his instructions to her, using a threatening

voice and tone she had not before heard from him. Still she said nothing.

They drove miles across the night city, using side streets, changing routes often, avoiding the boulevards and shopping districts where encounter with police patrols was likely. They drove for nearly an hour, the neighborhoods around them gradually deteriorating into a shabby tenement district that looked almost dead in the gray moonlight.

"Pull over in the middle of this block," Walsh said finally, "the third building past that streetlight." They were on a narrow street of ancient brownstones, five-story walkups with skeletons of iron railings along their flat cement porches, drawn shades in curtainless windows, gnarled, lidless garbage cans lining the sidewalk; a bleak, spiritless street, where the past, present and future are all one, and better days never come.

"Right there," Walsh said crisply. Alma parked at the curb and helped him out. "Get the medicine from the glove compartment," he ordered.

She helped him into one of the tombstone-like buildings, and they took the bare wooden stairs quietly and slowly, very slowly, up to the third floor. Walsh began sweating again, and leaned heavily on the woman as they shuffled down a dark hall to the rear apartment. Walsh knocked softly on the door.

"Who is it?" a muffled voice asked from inside.

"Open up, Cappo," Walsh said quietly. "It's Gerry."

The door opened at once, exposing a shabby, cheaply furnished living room filled with the thick air of stale smoke and warm whiskey. A thick-shouldered, unshaved man in an undershirt stared incredulously at Walsh and Alma, and behind him, her mouth agape in like surprise, stood a red-lipped, voluptuous woman with hair bleached almost yellow. The eyes of both of them—the man's bloodshot and darkly ringed, the woman's heavy with makeup—were wide in wonder at the sight of Walsh. Neither of them moved.

"Ain't nobody gonna ask me in?" Walsh inquired flatly, pushing past the man named Cappo. "Get that stuff," he ordered Cappo, indicating the packet of medicine Alma held.

"Gerry!" The blonde woman finally found her voice and hurried over to Walsh, throwing her arms around him. "Gerry, honey, are you all right?"

"Yeah, swell." Walsh hugged the woman as she deluged him with wet, lipstick-smeared kisses. "Help me to the couch, doll," he told her, "before I drop."

From the couch, with his arm around the blonde, Walsh looked up at Alma Hatch, who stood silently with her back to the closed door. Her face was flushed in embarrassment and she stood very still, with her eyes downcast.

"Okay, nursie," Walsh said levelly, "you can go now."

Alma raised her eyes and looked at him steadily, saying nothing.

"Wait a minute," said Cappo. "You can't let her out of here! She'll run straight to the cops."

"Relax," Walsh told him. "She ain't going to do nothing stupid. Are you, nursie?" he turned to Alma. "You don't want to go to jail, do you? As an accessory after the fact to murder? That's what they'll get you for, you know. They're never lenient with people who aid and abet cop killers."

"You—you said you didn't do it," Alma reminded him, "You said he did it," she looked at Cappo.

"Well," Walsh grinned, "it was only half a lie. Actually, we both blasted him." He picked up a cigarette from the coffee table and lighted it, leaning his head back as the blonde stroked his forehead. "If you're smart, sister," he said, "you'll hustle back to the hospital and drink some of that spiked coffee yourself. That way it'll look like an outside job and you won't get caught. It's better than spending the next ten years in a women's prison."

"You said you loved me—" Alma accused quietly.

"Look," Walsh snapped, his grin fading, "I said a lot of things, so what? You didn't really think I'd fall for a dame with a face like yours, did you?"

Alma stared at him for a moment, then slowly shook her head. "I suppose not," she said heavily. She turned to leave.

"So long, dearie," the blonde woman said smugly.

Alma went out and closed the door behind her. She heard Walsh and Cappo chuckle softly beyond the door. The narrow dark hallway stretched out before her like infinity. She walked mechanically.

That's always the way, Alma thought. She slowly descended the stairs. A girl that was homely—how she hated that word!—but a girl like her, a plain girl, just didn't have a chance with men. Not men like Gerry Walsh anyway. Not the sharp, good-looking men, the ones who appealed, the operators.

How many times now had she been taken in? There was that intern a few years back, the one with the nice smile. She didn't even remember

his name now. And the ambulance driver with the curly black hair. And the one she met on a blind date who was such a good dancer. And the one with the build who picked her up (she might as well admit it) at the beach. And the one—

She paused on the second floor landing and shook them all out of her mind. Too many to count, she thought. Besides, it hurt to remember them. They had all treated her the same way, all made her think she meant something to them; then all dropped her when they were finished with her. Nice guys, these sharp operators with their good looks, their grooming, their easy smiles and practiced lines.

Well, it's your own fault, homely, she said bitterly to herself. Dull face, dull mind. It figured. She walked on downstairs mumbling.

There were a dozen men waiting in the first floor foyer when she stepped off the last step. One of them moved quietly out of the shadows and came over to her. When he stepped into the dim hall light Alma saw that it was Tevell, the police captain.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Third floor," Alma told him, "rear apartment."

"Is Cappo there too?"

"Yes. And a woman."

Tevell nodded and turned to one of his officers. "Third floor rear; get six men around back, we'll go up this way in five minutes."

"May I go?" Alma asked.

"Yes." The policeman took her arm. "I'll see you to your car."

They walked down the outside steps and over to her car. Tevell opened the car door for her.

"Miss Hatch," he said, "I want you to know how much we appreciate your help. You did a good job."

Alma Hatch smiled, a tight, almost cruel little smile. She thought about Walsh, upstairs with his blonde.

"Don't mention it, Captain," she said evenly. "It was a pleasure."

She started her car and drove off down the bleak, deserted street.

Sweet Tranquility

by Leo P. Kelley

Now, just as the doctors and the reporters did in the beginning, the other two prisoners who wait with me on Death Row ask, "Why?"

I try to explain to Cairo and Frank, my fateful companions, just as I earlier tried to explain to the psychiatrists and the reporters, but Cairo and Frank just shake their heads. They simply can't understand why I did it; and, I confess, neither can I.

One of the doctors suggested to me at one point that I try writing it all down. "Don't concern yourself with matters of grammar or punctuation," he said. "Just put down whatever comes into your mind."

Well, now I am writing it down. I suppose when I am finished, I shall reread it and perhaps find at last an answer to the question that everyone has asked me over and over again: "Why, Dennis Colby, did you do it?"

To begin with—Nietzsche. I have always admired Nietzsche. He is both direct and precise; he minces no matters. Nietzsche said that the nature of man is evil. He went on to say that it is that very nature—that *evil* nature—that allows man to survive. It is both his armor and his broadsword against the enemy that is the world he never made. Quite to the point, as always, with Nietzsche.

Still, I have never considered myself an evil man; but Nietzsche, on most matters, is not to be denied, I am convinced. Actually, I have always considered myself luckier than many other people. I enjoyed the advantages that came from having enough money, good looks, even better friends and a really quite pleasant penchant for success in nearly every endeavor to which I chose to set my hand. There was little that I lacked in life.

Yet something, I suppose, was sadly lacking.

That thought reminds me of one of the statements made by the prosecutor during his summation at the trial: "Dennis Colby lacks an essential bond with the human community that is necessary, indeed vital, ladies

and gentlemen of the jury, if a man is to be something other than a grunting beast of the field."

But I digress. I shall proceed to tell it simply and in as straightforward a manner as is possible under the circumstances, which for me were and are both painful and terrifying.

The beginning? Who can say? Beginnings are untraceable. Where, for example, does the shore begin?

Her name was Susan. She was two years older than I and married, of course. Women like her always seem to be married. She lived on East 63rd Street in New York City in a small but elegant apartment which she had done in antique gold and bone white. She wore little jewelry, less makeup. She was a woman without the need for props. Hers were the latest and best, but never the kickiest clothes. She had her hair done when it needed doing, which was remarkably seldom. Her hair, you see, had the happy facility, as did the wonderful rest of her, of needing neither a manufactured innocence nor a mass-produced touch of deviltry.

Susan was a woman very much the natural daughter of Eve and as engrossing as was that vulnerable innocent undone by so simple a thing as an apple. Susan's undoing was much more complex. I, I am sorry now to say, was Susan's undoing. Or was she perhaps her own enemy?

At any rate, our relationship progressed at an innocent enough pace at first. It began when we were both children. Susan always led the way in our childhood games. I followed. She teased and taunted me—I endured and adored her.

As she grew older, she changed from a lovely child into an even lovelier woman. Neither beardless boys nor octogenarians were immune to her beauty. Then she married. Her husband, oddly enough, seemed to take her for granted. That dolt treated her as he would have treated any other of his prize possessions. That is to say, he treated Susan with a distant courtesy born of an easy familiarity. He showed on occasion, however, a kind of cool concern for her. The thought of them together was a fantasy I could not bear but one that returned to torment me with a relentlessness worthy of a Spanish Inquisitor. So I mentally eliminated Susan's husband from my landscape. From that miraculous moment on, he was never more than a minor annoyance to me, an ineffectual gadfly. From that moment on, my happiness soared when I was with Susan. In my mind, he remained forever chained to his rock that was the Earth, a poor Prometheus.

In the metropolitan garden where Susan and I grew up together like two blades of grass never quite touching, my infatuation for her matured into a yearning and then into a truly desperate drive to possess her completely and at any cost.

She ridiculed me when I spoke of love to her, secure in the knowledge of her overwhelming beauty.

"Of course you love me, Dennis. Why wouldn't you? It would be quite abnormal if you didn't," she said.

Her words liberated me. They seemed to melt the bars on a cage in which I had not, until then, realized I had been imprisoned.

"Susan," I said, "a trip somewhere would do us both so much good."

"Sardinia," she said, smiling wickedly at me. "Iceland, perhaps."

"Sardinia might do. Olives—and hills in the morning heavy with dew. But Iceland, no. Too passionless and pale, Iceland."

We traveled that summer to Venice and stayed for the whole month of August. We minded neither the stench of the canals nor the flocks of pigeons that befouled us everywhere we went. We saw churches, fountains, statues, museums, the Bridge of Sighs—a totally different world from the America we had left behind, where money smeared a green slime upon the earth and the struggle for power was a palpable miasma polluting the air.

We rented an enormous apartment in an aged palace bordering one of the canals. Its bare floors and drafty rooms amused us. Its dim interiors shrouded secrets, and the dampness that was almost visible on the mahogany furniture and stained glass of the windows only momentarily dismayed us.

Susan slept in the master bedroom, I in the smaller guest room. Perhaps Susan slept—I remember that I did not. In the heat and dampness of those endless, nerve-shattering nights, I would lie awake and imagine her in the other room doing womanly things and perhaps dreaming of him.

Her husband had been amenable concerning the journey, according to Susan. She had reminded him that I was an expert on art and a collector in my own small way, and that the trip would surely prove to be a financially sound investment if we could secure for him a good painting or two. It was true. I had studied art not in the way of courses which supposedly teach one to "appreciate" it, but in the way of a man who must know every freckle and faint flush that adorns the body of his beloved

mistress. Such study, plus an innate sensitivity to the play of color, the manner of putting paint to canvas, had allowed me to purchase a painting here, a drawing there that had, in several instances, tripled in value within five years:

Susan and I spent our days gazing at Bellinis, Giorgiones and Tintoretos. The Titians were particularly impressive. But the clash of styles in the Venetian architecture wearied me. Here was a hint of Byzantine—over there, Italian Gothic—and everywhere the evidence of Renaissance architecture; quite extravagant, in the manner of a three-ring circus.

I bought a Véronese for him at what I considered a satisfactory price but one which Susan considered "outrageous." As we wandered idly along the Rialto, I patiently explained to her the relationship of lire to dollars. She agreed, when my lesson ended in laughter, that the price paid for the Veronese had indeed been "reasonable." One had to consider relationships carefully, I slyly told her. She merely smiled and said that she was certain her husband would be pleased with the purchase.

My worst and best days were spent on the Lido. Susan never wore a bikini, but the one-piece white suit that encased her languid body blinded me. As the fat Italian sun fondled her day after day and she surrendered willingly to its hot embrace, growing Mediterranean in the most ravishing way, I swam. The water was warm—I longed for Iceland after all. Susan would sit on the beach glistening like a bright savage in her oil, and eating an ice I had bought for her. I began to feel as if I existed for no other reason than to fetch and carry for her. I cursed her silently; I cursed her for her cruelty in bawdy gutter language and in multi-voweled Italian. She sensed it, I'm certain, but instead of extending sympathy, she offered to share her ice with me.

Our idyll ended as idylls always do. We stood, arm in arm, in the train station on our last day, and finally the train rumbled and shook us and itself toward the mainland.

"It was lovely," Susan said, leaning her head on my shoulder. "Everything was so very lovely, Dennis."

"Even the canals?"

She laughed gaily. "Even those stinking canals."

When we returned to New York, I presented him with the Veronese and he put on his reading glasses and stared at it for a moment and then said, "It looks a bit murky, don't you think?"

When Susan phoned me the following week, she was excited but in control of herself. He was sick, she told me—very sick. The doctor had said it was his heart again. He had somberly commented to Susan that more and more men were dying younger and younger and it discouraged him.

"How bad is it?" I asked her.

She didn't know.

We both found out the next day when he died. Cardiac arrest; dull words to hide an unfortunate lack of immortality. A man ought to go out with more of an epitaph than that, I thought. Cardiac *eruption!* Now that would be far better, insofar as it implied protest—active protest—rather than the weak surrender of "arrest."

I went to the funeral and walked beside the composed widow and stood beside the gaping grave and marveled at how much the minister looked like Queen Nefertiti with his slanted forehead and sharp slice of a nose.

That evening I suggested to Susan that she give up her apartment and move in with me, if only temporarily.

She shook her head. "No, Dennis," she said, looking around my rather severe living room. "It wouldn't be right, would it, considering the fact that you have your own life to live?"

"Susan," I protested, "my life is with you! Otherwise, it isn't life. It's purgatory!"

She reached out and stroked my hand. "You are such a fool, Dennis."

I couldn't bring myself to say anything more. I couldn't shout it from the rooftops or on street corners. I could not—I *would* not—tell her that I loved her more than any other woman in the world. She would have called me charming but quite hopelessly mad. But she knew—I *knew* she knew! It was evident in her eyes at unguarded moments when I would surprise her studying me over a luncheon table or as we chatted idly in a theater lobby; and she *played* with that knowledge, a cat shaking a helpless mouse in its cruel teeth!

"You know I love you very much, Dennis," she said one night in that mocking way of hers. "I have since we were children together."

Suddenly, I felt faint—and frightened. Ridiculous! Yet my palms were moist, I realized.

"However," she continued, smiling faintly, "I won't let you sacrifice your life because of your concern for me."

"It's no sacrifice," I protested, "because I love you too, Susan."

She squeezed my hand. "I want you to be happy."

"You've made me very happy. Last August in Venice, just being alone with you was—"

"I really must go."

Several months passed during which Susan and I often lunched together and made pilgrimages to off-off-Broadway previews where everyone was somber and the plays were unintelligible. We spent Christmas Eve in the Oak Room at the Plaza Hotel.

"Santa Claus is coming to town," I sang tunelessly to Susan.

"Then you'd better watch out," she said. "The old boy's foxy. Coal and switches in your stocking if you don't behave yourself."

"Susan, we could go back to Venice."

She widened her eyes, looked away and then beckoned to a passing waiter. She ordered a drink for herself, sternly telling me I'd had quite enough.

"Acapulco," I suggested. "Or Tangier."

"Do you know T. Edward Carruthers?" she asked me.

"Everyone knows T. Edward Carruthers, the Third. Wine importing, isn't it?"

Susan nodded.

"Carruthers, the Third," I mumbled. "Ugly as an ogre. The first two Carruthers must have been mutants."

"Dennis, I'm going to marry him."

The English language—or any language for that matter—is an adequate instrument with which we convey news of births and deaths, our joys and heartbreak. Usually it is sufficient unto all; but it suddenly was not sufficient for me, not right then. "You're going to marry him," I repeated foolishly. She might have been speaking Swahili.

"Yes, next month," she replied.

"You're not! You can't!" My voice, to my surprise, sounded resonant and forceful, rich with a manly calm. "I won't let you."

"Edward has been very kind to me. I've been seeing him quite often since . . . since the funeral." She hesitated. ". . . And before it as well. I suppose I should tell you that, too."

"Susan, you are not going to—"

"Oh, Dennis, don't let's begin again. Just shut up!" She paused, looking at me over the rim of her cocktail glass. "It's really the very best thing—for everyone concerned."

I stood up and discovered with some shock that I was roaring like a wounded lion. People were staring at me.

The Oak Room is not noted for *grand guignol* but I introduced it that night. My words didn't matter—or even make much sense, I suppose. I accused Susan of betraying me again. I said that she was not to be trusted; that she should be put away somewhere, safely certified. I remember only one remark of hers at that point.

"I suppose it's true that it takes one to know one," she said, her lips twisted in an unmistakable sneer. Then she summoned a waiter who, with several of his colleagues, put me out.

You never notice how burly waiters are as they glide about on plush carpets carrying little silver trays and smirking, not until they pick you up under the arms—not quite off the floor—and put you out into the night that turns out to be empty of any star.

Susan disappeared. I sat on the edge of the Plaza fountain that was waterless for the winter and filled it with my tears.

"Bad trip, buddy?" someone whispered, and I punched him in the face which I couldn't see.

The day came—the day of the wedding that Susan and T. Edward Carruthers would celebrate in years to come, among fine china and complaints about servants. I couldn't control my impulse, although I tried desperately to do so. I went to the church on that bleak January afternoon and eased myself into an inconspicuous corner of the vestibule. Only a few well-wishers and members of the wedding party were inside waiting.

When Susan arrived alone in a limousine a few minutes later, I moved quickly toward the door.

"Susan," I said, "you're coming with me."

She saw the rifle. I held it openly now, cradled in my arm, the sheet in which I had wrapped it earlier discarded. I repeated my command, a drowning man carrying on a hopeless dialogue with the last straw in his universe.

She glanced behind her. There were only a few people in sight some distance from the church. Obviously, she was both frightened and embarrassed.

"Dennis, is this the final madness? Let me pass!"

I barred her entrance to the church. "Susan, be reasonable!"

"Do you call that rifle reasonable?"

I seized her arm and hurried her down the steps. She said nothing; she knew me too well after all the years. Words were no longer of any use to either of us. I signaled to the chauffeur in the limousine but he saw my rifle, gaped and gasped, and then roared away down the street.

At the same instant, Susan jerked her arm free and ran toward the door of an antique shop several yards away. In that single action, which involved not only her body but her mind as well, was the measure of my total defeat.

I realized in a flash of agony that Susan would spend the rest of her life like this—fleeing from me. She would lead me on and then laugh and run from the anguish she had aroused in me. I raised the rifle and fired one doomed shot.

I was beside her almost before she touched the sidewalk. I remember thinking that there was not very much blood. I remember thinking that she was, possibly, a species of vampire that had dieted too long. My thoughts were a carousel out of control. I threw her lifeless body over my shoulder and ran from the shouts and pointing fingers of those still living on the street and in the emptying shops.

Directionless and adrift now, I carried Susan into a tower of glass on Third Avenue. People moved rapidly out of our way like obsequious peasants before the approaching retinue of their ruler. I entered an empty automatic elevator and pressed the button for the top floor. An eternity later, I came out and found the door leading to the roof at the end of the long hall. It was locked. I blasted it open with a single shot.

On the roof was a water tower; underfoot—black, cracked gravel. Here and there air vents raised their shiny aluminum hoods. I put Susan down, turning her face upward, and sobbing, whispered her name.

Five minutes later, the police kicked open the door at the top of the stairs and yelled at me to surrender. I caught a glimpse of blue, a glint of steel and the sheen of polished holster leather.

I fired and heard the thud of something falling in the door's interior that was suddenly so dim to my dazed and Susanless sight.

I moved quickly to one side so that the awkward angle of their sighting would prevent them from hitting me—but actually I wanted them to shoot me. They could not have known that at the time but it was true. I continued firing. I felt, after each shot, a lessening of the physical tension that had been torturing me for so long and the beginning of a sweet tranquility unlike any I had ever experienced before.

The police began using a bull horn, booming through it about surrender.

I had known the moment was coming. When my ammunition ran out at last and I had run down like a broken windup toy that had been forgotten by all the children everywhere, they stepped cautiously out of the doorway, their guns drawn. They approached me warily as if they were anthropologists and I some new and deadly species they had just discovered. I dropped my empty rifle as soon as they appeared and walked to where Susan lay. I knelt down beside her and touched her cold cheek.

They pulled me to my feet. On their command, I held out my arms and they snapped the handcuffs on my wrists.

"Okay, take him down!" shouted a red-faced detective with eyes of ice.

"Her name is Susan," I told the other detective who was leading me toward the door and the steps leading down from the roof. "She's—"

"We know," he interrupted. "Mr. Carruthers called us from the church and identified you. He told us he'd seen you take her with you."

"You won't let her lie there alone too long, will you?" I asked.

Now, as I sit here in my cell, I remember his voice sounding genuinely sympathetic when he answered, "No, Colby, we won't. We'll bring your sister's body down right after we get you out of here."



Deathbed

by Frank Sisk

The doctor and the nurse emerged from George Painter's room just after four P.M. They conferred for a long minute in the upper hallway, voices low, before moving to the head of the circular staircase. At the foot, fretfully waiting, Coral hadn't been able to make out a word that was said.

Why, she wondered, are members of the medical profession always whispering to each other? Why must they treat death and adenoids with similar secrecy? Even orderlies conceal the result of a thermometer reading as if it were privileged information. Charlatans, most of them. They certainly weren't fooling George Painter with their mysterious muttering, always a bit out of earshot. That old crock has known for at least a month that he's on the last lap. What's more, the idea of death doesn't seem to faze him at all. Lately his rare smile has grown sly. As his strength ebbs he looks each day more like a wily old gambler with an ace up his sleeve, a final card with which he plans to trump, for a moment at least, death itself.

Dr. Wolff and Miss Suratt were descending the stairs, he a stocky figure in gray tweed, she a slender figure in white nylon, their downward progress soundless on the thick gold carpet.

Coral slipped a dolorous mask over her tanned face. This morning she had played tennis with Otis and a little before lunch they had made love. She was still feeling keenly alive, almost youthful—not a bit like a prospective widow—but she wore the sad mask well.

"How is he doing, Doctor?" Into her own whisper she wove the correct amount of tension. "Is he still alert?"

"Very much so," Wolff whispered back. "He's a remarkable man."

"Is he able to speak?"

"Yes, indeed. Not with any of his erstwhile vigor, of course, but his mind is quite clear. Quite clear."

"Excuse me if you will," Miss Suratt whispered. "I simply must go to the kitchen for my cup of tea."

"Phone me at once if there's a critical change," Wolff said.

"And have Glenda fix you something to eat," Coral said.

"Yes, thanks," Miss Suratt said, on her way.

"Please be frank with me, Doctor," Coral said. "How long does George really have?"

Wolff expelled a tiny hiss of air through crooked teeth. "My dear lady, I try not to prophesy in these terminal cases. A patient with a will of iron may battle a long time after that last faint spark of life should have flickered out. Your husband is that kind of person. A man of very strong will, very strong indeed."

"I'm only asking for an educated guess, Doctor."

"I hesitate to give it."

"You're an experienced physician. I understand you've been treating my husband for at least ten years. You must know what to expect. Roughly."

"I do. Very roughly."

"Will he last through the night?"

"I believe that's safe to say. Yes, through the night."

"Through the week?"

"Ah now, my dear lady." Wolff raised a defensive hand.

"Well, may I see him now? Is he well enough for that?"

"Certainly. As a matter of fact, he asked me to send you up. But I do advise you to keep the visit brief. He's already had a rather busy afternoon. Yes, rather busy."

You can say that again, Coral thought.

First, at 1:30, the densely bewhiskered priest from the Greek Orthodox Church had appeared for the third time in as many days. His name was Mikos Gavros. He arrived as usual in a dusty old limousine, his black-garbed bulk occupying most of the tonneau. The chauffeur was his seventeen-year-old son Teddy, the eldest of what Coral understood to be a big brood. Father Gavros' patriarchy wasn't confined to the spirit alone.

Teddy, a runner-up in the hirsute category to his old man, hurried his own bearded face around the car to open the rear door. Father Gavros squeezed out. They entered the foyer together. Coral was there to receive the priest's greeting, one of oily unction that parted his peppery whiskers in the middle, exposing lips of liverish hue.

Was he seeking a new convert? Coral wondered.

While he was closeted upstairs with the dying man, whose name had been legally changed long ago from Pantopoulous to Painter, Coral was left with Teddy, who seemed to have a rather salacious eye. She led him to the library, where she'd twice before abandoned him, and abandoned him again.

Norman Yard arrived an hour later, a few minutes after the departure of Gavros and son. The habitual smile of semi-amusement lurked beneath his clipped grey moustache, the slender brown attaché case grew from his left arm like a prosthetic device. Coral's opinion of lawyers, never worshipful at best, had been dropping steadily with each of Yard's frequent visits this last month. She detested that know-it-all smirk of his. Smirking once more, Yard hastily ascended the stairs to consult with his richest client.

Yes, old George Painter had indeed had a busy afternoon.

She entered the enormous bedchamber for the first time in a week. The windows were closed against the late October chill, the great brocaded drapes were drawn. The air was heavy with an odor which she would always associate with George—Turkish cigarette smoke—and there was an odor of something else now, something repugnantly dry and stale. The room was a place of silent dusk except for a nimbus of light centered around a lamp on a bedside table. George sat propped up like a bloodless puppet, so thin that his body hardly raised the thermal blanket covering him, and he was smoking a cigarette; the grey tendrils curling slowly round the lampshade were the only signs of life.

"Hello, George," Coral said nervously as she approached the foot of the king-size bed.

The dying man's face was skeletal but the dark eyes imbedded in that face burned like coals of fire. Coral felt almost literally scorched by his gaze.

"I just left Dr. Wolff. He says you're doing fine."

With brown, bony fingers the man removed the cigarette from his dry lips.

"You are a natural liar," he said in a thin, hoarse voice.

"He told me you wanted to see me," Coral said.

"I said I wanted to see—" A thin hacking cough dimmed his eyes for a moment. "Yes, I said I wanted to see that slut without conscience who calls herself my wife. And here you are."

"George, this is hardly the time—"

"Time? It is the only time. It is the last time. Isn't it the time you've been waiting for? For nearly three years?"

"George, I really think—"

"Hold your tongue, Coral. Listen." Again that throat-scraping cough. "Pour me a glass of water."

Concealing the disgust that this man aroused in her, she went to the bedside and reached for the pitcher. How had she ever managed to endure these sickening years? Money. Was the money really worth it? It had better be.

"I nurtured no illusions when we married," he was saying. "A tennis bum, your first husband. You outgrew him. Understandable. I outgrew a few previous wives when I was young. You wanted a little luxury for a change. I wanted somebody—" the cough was like a rasp across cartilage—"somebody to keep me warm the last years of my life. Not love—the gesture of affection. A fair trade."

"Do you think you should be talking so much?" She held out the glass of water.

"I should talk. You should listen." He took a sip of water and set the glass on the table. "So listen."

"I'll try."

"It will open your deceitful eyes, what I have to say."

"Please. No more of that."

"Almost from the beginning you broke our personal deal."

"What did you expect?"

"Just that. It was no surprise. A healthy young trollop tied to a sick old goat. The horns were inevitable. As long as you were discreet I was tolerant. My pride was not touched. But then you finally threw discretion to the winds. Your gross infidelities became common knowledge. You made me the butt of sad dirty jokes. Even then . . . yes, even then I—" The cough was phlegmy this time and he gave it thoughtful concentration. "Even then I rationalized the situation. But when you seduced my nephew Otis under this roof and flaunted the affair, that was just too much. I decided to take drastic steps."

"I don't know what you can do about it now."

"At this moment Otis is on a plane to Athens where his father, my brother, will welcome him. Already I have done that."

"Impossible. We had lunch together and—"

"He failed to mention the journey. In Greek the name Otis means keen-eared. A few days ago my nephew listened well to Norman Yard, who outlined certain financial arrangements that could improve his future."

"Why, you interfering old buzzard!"

"Wait till you hear what I have in store for you, Coral."

"Well, you can't disinherit me, George. I'm your legal wife. You have no children. Even if you die intestate I'm entitled to half of what you leave."

That rare, sly smile tightened his dry lips. "You know the state law well. So you may as well see what you will inherit half of." From his bathrobe pocket he took a thin sheaf of greenbacks. "A hundred thousand, ten bills of ten thousand each. My entire estate as of today."

"You're not kidding me, George," Coral said nonchalantly.

"You'll see soon enough. All my other assets have become part of the ecological Painter Foundation. What I have here is all that's left of my personal wealth."

Stunned, Coral watched the disgusting old man take one of the bills and tear it into a dozen small pieces.

"What in hell are you doing?"

Reaching for the glass of water, he crammed the shredded paper into his mouth and washed it down with a gulping swallow. "I'm taking it with me," he said as he began tearing up another bill.

"Why, you crazy old bugger," she screamed, grasping his scrawny throat in her strong tennis-playing hands. He died so quickly that she couldn't believe it. She looked at the greenback clutched in his hand. It was transparently bogus. Of course. The government hadn't printed \$10,000 bills in years.

"What have you done to him?" asked a voice at her shoulder. It was Miss Suratt.

"What have I done to him?" She raised the murdering hands to her eyes. "What has he done to me? What has *he* done to *me*?"



The Choker

by Edward D. Hoch

It was a season in Manhattan when the wealthy ladies had ceased to wear their fine jewelry. They wore cheap paste replicas or no jewelry at all, because it wasn't worth being held up and possibly injured on the way home from some swank dinner dance. That was why I didn't really expect anything as I lounged in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel watching the arrivals for the charity ball that night.

Then all at once she was there, swooping through the revolving door as if the world were hers. She was lithe and lovely in her shimmering gold gown, like a goddess imagined in some half-remembered dream. In that first moment, however, my eyes were not on that lovely face or figure, but on the dazzling diamond choker that circled her pretty neck. I hadn't seen one like it in years, but there it was, catching and flashing the lights as she crossed the lobby a few feet ahead of an older man in evening clothes.

In that instant I knew it was real. She was not the sort to wear imitation anything. She could have walked into that lobby without a diamond on her and still caused a stir. If she chose to arrive wearing that choker, it was the real thing.

I left the lobby soon after that, already plotting my next moves. I knew from past experience that these affairs usually begin to break up shortly before midnight. By that time I'd be ready. At the apartment I picked up my gun, along with the moustache and rubber nose I wear for jobs like this. Then I had a decision to make. I wanted to do the job alone, and was pretty sure that I could swing it without Sammy or anyone else—but should I risk it? For a lady that lovely, the guy might just decide to play hero, and then I'd have a murder rap on my hands.

Reluctantly, I decided to take Sammy along, at least to keep the guy in line while I got the choker. It would only cost me a grand, maybe less if Sammy were hard up, and he was always hard up.

I dialed his number and listened to the familiar whining. "Hey, Chief, how are you? How's business? You been scoring without me?"

"I need somebody for tonight, Sammy. An hour's work, maybe less."

"Sure, Chief. You know me."

"Five?"

"With hardware?" Sammy asked, meaning guns.

"Yes."

"Then I gotta have a grand, Chief. You know that."

I hesitated to make it sound right, though I'd already figured on that much. "I'll go for it. I need you." Then I went on to outline exactly what he should do. It was a standard job, the sort Sammy and I had pulled before, with only a few new twists to fool the police.

I was waiting outside the Plaza when the first guests began to drift out of the charity ball, heading for their hired cars or waiting for the doorman to signal a cab. This was the tricky part, and I knew too well that all sorts of things could go wrong. If Sammy was on schedule, he would have stolen a taxi thirty minutes earlier from a lower Manhattan diner where the drivers take their breaks. Right now that taxi would be parked across 59th Street at the entrance to Central Park, waiting for my signal. With luck, that signal would come before a cruising police car spotted the stolen cab. Then it was a matter of Sammy's skill in maneuvering into the right position in line.

I was hoping the lady with the diamond choker would leave with a large group of others. Standing in line while awaiting a cab, it was more likely her position could be calculated. If she and the man who escorted her were fourth in line, Sammy could slip into fourth position without too much difficulty. The cabs at the Plaza don't have space to form a long line. They have to turn right from 59th or come across it from the park. Either way, I figured a driver of Sammy's skill could slip in ahead of someone.

What if the lady had a car of her own—a big black limo with a chauffeur? I was ready for that one too. Sammy would pick me up with his taxi and we'd go after them; but I was hoping we could get them into the cab. In close quarters there was less chance the escort would try for a hero's role.

After thirty minutes of waiting I began to grow nervous. The bulk of the guests had departed, and the doorman's frantic whistling for taxis had tapered off to an occasional toot. I nervously smoked a cigarette while squeezing the rubber nose in my pocket. The longer I lingered here, the

better the chance that I'd be recognized by some cop on the beat who knew me.

Then I saw her again, coming down the steps like some famous actress. My eyes focused on the diamond choker and I almost forgot to signal Sammy. There were two couples ahead of her, but they seemed to be together. That meant one cab. I glanced over my shoulder and raised my arm as if stretching. Almost at once I saw Sammy's cab cross 59th Street and edge toward the hotel entrance.

He was third in line! The lady with the choker would enter the taxi ahead of his!

"Pardon me," I said suddenly, darting in front of the lady and her escort.

"What's this?" the man grumbled. "That's our cab!"

I was already inside, slamming the door. As we drove away I saw them turn toward Sammy's taxi.

"Where to, mister?" my driver asked.

I hesitated, waiting to see what direction the cab behind me would take. It went by us and turned east on 58th. "Over 58th," I said. "Stay with that cab ahead."

"You mean follow them?"

"Just stay with them." I couldn't jump into Sammy's cab as I'd originally planned, but this might work out even better.

The cab ahead wove through the dark streets until it reached the haven of a Sutton Place apartment. I shoved a couple of dollar bills at my cabbie and hopped out. The moustache and rubber nose were already in place.

As I'd hoped, the lady was first out of the taxi while her escort lingered to pay Sammy. My cab had already turned the corner when I reached her, pushed her aside, and slammed the door on the man. Sammy knew what to do. He stepped on the accelerator and the cab shot forward with its unwilling passenger.

"What is this?" the lady gasped, clearly terrified.

We faced each other on the deserted sidewalk, with the street light catching the glitter of her diamond choker. I showed her the gun and said, "You know what I want. Take it off."

There was a sound to my left and I saw the doorman appear from her building. I turned to cover him with my gun. "Don't move. I'd really hate to hurt anyone." Then, to the lady, "Come on—I want that choker. Quit stalling."

Her hands went to her neck. The doorman was frozen helpless, and Sammy was already out of sight with her boy friend or husband. She had no choice—but when our eyes met there was something else there, something I couldn't quite read.

"I suppose there's no chance of bargaining with you," she said quietly.

"None whatever. You shouldn't wear things like that if you don't want them stolen."

The diamond choker came away from her throat and she held it out to me. That was when I saw it, in the glare of the overhead street light—a group of ugly dark bruises on her neck. I knew in that instant she'd risked wearing this valuable piece of jewelry for just one reason, to cover up those bruises.

"Thanks, lady," I told her, moving backward so I could see them both. Our eyes met again, for just an instant, and then I was gone.

Sammy was already waiting for me at my apartment. "No trouble, Chief. I drove the guy a few blocks away and dropped him near the East River. Then I went back and ditched the cab in Central Park. Did you get it?"

I tossed the diamond choker onto the table. "Yeah, I got it."

"Jeez, it's a beauty!"

"Funny thing—I think she was wearing it to cover up some marks on her throat."

"Who cares why she was wearing it? We've got it now."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'll try to unload it in the morning."

"What about my grand?"

"You didn't have to do much for it."

"I got rid of the guy, didn't I? You couldn't have handled him alone. No chance you could have."

"Maybe." I stared down at the necklace. "Can you wait till I get the cash for this?"

"No dice, Chief. If I wait, I gotta have more than a thousand."

"All right," I agreed with a sigh. Better to have him out of it anyway. I went into the bedroom and got the money. "You didn't leave any prints on the cab?"

"Course not!" He took the money and counted it carefully. This is not a business where people trust one another.

"I'll call you again," I said as he left.

"Yeah, sure. Take it easy, Chief."

I locked the door after him and sat down to study my prize. The jewels glistened in the light from overhead, and as I studied them I could see again the deep bruises on the lady's neck. Bruises, in a line, made by fingers that had tried to choke the life from her.

Had she been mugged? Raped? Or simply assaulted by that man in the car with her? Was he her husband or her lover? I had to know the answers.

She could only have risked wearing this diamond choker to the ball because there was nothing else in her wardrobe to cover the finger marks on her throat. Understandably, she had not wanted them seen and commented upon. Did that mean the man who accompanied her was unaware of them? Had they been inflicted by a secret lover in a moment of anger?

I tossed the necklace across the table. Damn it, I was acting too much like a detective and not enough like a thief.

I picked up the *Post* the following day before noon and read the story: *Socialite Assaulted by Jewel Thief*. There was a two-column photograph of Mrs. Arnold Madison displaying the bruises on her throat, bruises which she claimed I had inflicted during the robbery!

I threw down the paper in disgust. Hell, the doorman was a witness! He must know it wasn't true!

Of course she'd slipped him money to lie about it. That was easy enough. Now she could appear in public, because there was a certified explanation for the bruises. Me! I was the explanation!

I didn't like it.

I read the rest of the article. The man with her had indeed been her husband, a prominent stockbroker; but that fact didn't answer all my questions.

I read the article through twice, and spent a long time staring at her face and the bruises on her throat.

Then I decided I would have to see her again.

"Mrs. Arnold Madison?"

The voice on the other end of the phone line seemed to hesitate. "Yes?" "I read about your robbery in the afternoon papers. A terrible thing." "Who is this?"

"That doesn't matter," I said. "I'm just someone who may be able to get your necklace back."

"Please call the police or the insurance company if you have any information."

"Mrs. Madison—"

"Who is this?" she asked again.

"What about the bruises on your neck?"

I heard her sharp intake of breath and knew she'd remembered my voice. "You're the man who robbed me!"

"But not the man who tried to strangle you."

"What do you want?" Her voice was the cool hiss of a cornered serpent.

What did I want? "To see you, to talk about the necklace. Maybe to arrange for its return."

"For how much?"

"My price would be reasonable. We could discuss it."

"All right," she agreed after a moment. "You can come here."

"No, thanks. I don't like police."

"Where, then? I don't like jewel thieves."

"Do you know the flower show at Bryant Park? It's in a big tent there, all this week." I wanted a place where there would be plenty of people.

"I'll be there. What time?" she asked.

"Four o'clock?" I didn't want to give her time to think about calling the police.

"All right."

I hung up and left the phone booth quickly. I knew there hadn't been time for a trace, but I never take unnecessary risks.

I reached the big striped tent in the center of Bryant Park at ten minutes to four, and scouted the area for any plainclothes cops I might know by sight. Everything seemed normal, and exactly at four I saw her alight from a cab on 42nd Street and hurry up the steps to the park. She was alone.

Without the rubber nose and moustache, I didn't think she'd recognize me right away. I circled her a couple of times in the crowd, making sure she wasn't being watched, and finally approached her as she stood admiring a display of orchids. "Haven't we met before?" I asked quietly.

She turned, smiling. "I believe we have! But I didn't recognize you without your moustache."

"Are you enjoying the show?"

"In truth I've never been much of a gardener." She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater which effectively hid the bruises on her neck.

"I'm sorry about last night." Seeing her now, I knew I'd been right to come. She was a mystery that needed solving, if only to satisfy my own curiosity.

"Why should you be? I imagine it's your profession." She eyed me openly for the first time. "But you do look much better with your own nose."

"You didn't call the police?"

"No, I felt I'd be safe enough here." We had strolled out of the tent and found a bench on which to sit. "Now, what about my necklace?"

"Would you be willing to buy it back?"

"The insurance company—"

"I don't deal with insurance companies. You can have the insurance and the necklace both."

"That would be against the law."

I shrugged. "You should never have worn it last night. A woman with your beauty doesn't need diamonds."

"Thank you for the compliment. I thought gentlemen thieves only existed in bad novels."

"I may not be a gentleman thief, but I don't go around choking my victims, either. Why did you tell that to the police?"

She shrugged. "They saw the bruises and jumped to the conclusion. At that point, the truth would have been much too complicated."

"The truth being that your husband tried to kill you."

Her eyes came up, startled, almost afraid. "Why do you say that?"

"I wasn't sure till I knew the man in the taxi was your husband. Someone tried to choke you, and you didn't report it to the police. You wore the necklace to hide the bruises. From your husband or merely from the others at the charity ball? I figured you couldn't wear the necklace around the house all day. If you were trying to hide the marks from your husband, you would have covered them with makeup rather than the necklace. And if he knew about them, chances are he caused them."

"You're pretty smart."

"I get by."

Her eyes met mine again. "Let's get down to business. What will you take for the necklace?"

"In these inflated days it's probably worth a quarter of a million."

"It's insured for half that amount. And a fence would give you a quarter of it, wouldn't he?"

"You know a great deal about the business."

"My husband and I are prepared to pay you fifty thousand dollars for its return."

She was willing to deal, and that surprised me. I'd come half expecting a police trap, or some stalling tactic. Instead, I had myself a deal. "Seventy-five," I said, so as not to appear too anxious.

She shook her head. "Fifty or nothing."

"You'll collect from the insurance company too?"

"That's our business. Yes or no?"

I stared over at the big striped tent, trying to figure all the angles. So far the caper had cost me only one grand, paid to Sammy. A profit of forty-nine thousand was nothing to be sneezed at, especially since I'd avoid the risk of trying to fence the choker myself. "Yes. It's a deal."

The tension in her face relaxed, and I wondered why she was so anxious for the deal to go through. "Very good. Can we arrange it today—tonight?"

"I suppose so." Once I'd agreed to it, I was anxious to get the thing off my hands. "Where will the exchange be made?"

"My apartment?"

I shook my head. "Too much chance of a police trap there."

"You still don't trust me."

"Do you trust me?" I countered.

"All right," she sighed. "We'll be anyplace you name—but it can't very well be done in public."

I had to agree with her there. I thought about having Sammy steal another taxi, but decided against it. Sammy was getting greedy and it would only cost me money. "How about the lower level of Grand Central Station?" I suggested. "It's closed at night now, but we can get down there easily enough."

"Fine. Nine o'clock?"

"Agreed. I'll see you there."

I left her on the bench and walked away fast. There didn't seem to be anyone following me, but I took no chances. I went in the 42nd Street entrance to the library, took the elevator up one floor, and exited on Fifth Avenue. Then I grabbed a rush-hour bus down to my apartment to wait.

As nine o'clock approached, I grew increasingly uneasy. I was expected to go to the lower level of Grand Central Station with the diamond choker in hand, to exchange it for fifty thousand dollars in cash.

Where would Mrs. Madison and her husband come up with that much cash on such short notice? I'd met her at four, with the banks already closed for the day. It was doubtful if people, even as wealthy as the Madisons, kept that sort of cash around the house.

That meant a trap.

Yet, if it were to be a trap, why not this afternoon in Bryant Park? The answer seemed obvious—this afternoon I wouldn't have had the necklace along. Tonight it would be with me and the police would be there waiting—but maybe I had a trick or two up my sleeve too.

I arrived at the station early, with the necklace in a bag of sweet rolls I had bought. Then I found an empty locker along the ramp to the lower level and left the bag inside. I placed the locker key in an envelope and taped it inside the swinging lid of a trash receptacle where I figured it would be safer than in my pocket.

When I went back down the ramp to meet Mrs. Madison and her husband, I found the lower level completely empty. Though I knew the area was patrolled by station guards, I figured no one would bother us for a few minutes.

The Madisons arrived promptly at nine, she with her hands stuffed deep into the pockets of a black coat, he with arms swinging and an air of jaunty uncertainty about him. I'd seen him only briefly outside the Plaza, but it was enough to know this was the same man—Arnold Madison himself.

"Well," he said as they reached the point where I stood against the closed ticket windows, "I understand you're the man responsible for last night's robbery."

"Let's just say I can arrange a deal," I said.

"Do you have the necklace?" He was a tall man, with hard grey eyes, whom I immediately disliked. His fingers were long and tapering—I could imagine them leaving those marks on her throat.

"I have it. Let's see the money." If the police were to appear at that moment, I had nothing incriminating on me.

No police came. "Show him the money," Madison said to his wife.

"Gladly." Her right hand came out of her pocket, and I noticed the dark glove first. Then I saw the pistol, a cheap, small-caliber automatic almost hidden in the palm of her hand. "I'm sorry," she said to me, lifting the gun.

Then she shot her husband cleanly through the back of the head.

It happened so fast that I had no chance to move, no opportunity to shout a warning. As Arnold Madison fell dead at my feet, she tossed the weapon down and started to scream. I realized in that instant the deadly cleverness of her plan. The meeting with me, and this rendezvous tonight, had been used by her to rid herself of the man who'd tried to kill her. For some reason—money? social position?—divorce had been out of the question. Now she'd killed him, and provided a perfect fall guy for the police.

I was the fall guy! That's why she'd told me she was sorry before she pulled the trigger. The shot and her screams would bring the police running, and they'd find me with the gun at my feet and the necklace in my pocket. Socialite slain during deal with jewel thief. It would be her word against mine.

Only the necklace wasn't in my pocket, and that just might save me.

A station guard appeared, running, followed by a uniformed policeman. She was still standing there screaming over the body of the man she'd murdered when they reached her. "That man," she said, pointing to me. "He killed—"

"I saw it all," I told the officers. "I heard a commotion down here and came to investigate. They were arguing and I got here just as she shot him."

"He's lying!" she flung at me. "He stole my necklace! It's in his pocket!"

The officer stared at me uncertainly. Already others were running up, attracted by the noise. "There's nothing in my pockets," I said calmly, "except my identification. But I'd suggest you take the lady's right glove to check for gunpowder particles."

"Don't believe him!" she shouted.

"What sort of identification, sir?" the officer asked me.

I flipped open the wallet to show my badge and ID. "Detective first grade Charles Barnes, assigned to the 91st Precinct. You can call them and check if you want."

That was when the lady's mouth fell open.

Sometimes being both a cop and a robber can get you into some tight spots, but it can get you out of them too.

Not an Enemy in the World

by Charlotte Edwards

I always thought of myself as the sort of person of whom, if I were murdered, everybody would say, "She didn't have an enemy in the world. It must have been a madman. One of those senseless crimes, you know?"

After all, you spend your life really caring for people, trying to get along with all of them, even the nasty ones, pulling in your horns when you want to gore, keeping your mouth shut when you've got more than a few names you'd like to call, doing unto others as they sure as hell never do unto you, and you expect some understanding—eventually.

"She didn't have an enemy in the world. Everybody was her friend." Eh?

That's why the letter came as such a shock.

I was in a hurry, on my way to work. If I miss the 7:15 bus, I have to wait for the 7:40. It gets me there on time, all right, but I'm so out of breath that I feel as if I were running the whole day. I like to be neat and planned, and arriving a few minutes early at my desk is just the ticket to pace myself till night.

Anyhow, I met the mailman on the sidewalk outside my house. I just grabbed the mail he handed me, stuck it in my purse, and double-timed down to the corner. The bus was pulling away, but the driver knew me, so he slammed on the brakes and waited.

Well, I had enough breath to say, "Thank you so very much. It's wonderful to know that somebody recognizes you and takes a bit of extra trouble for you."

He grunted without looking at me, changed my dollar bill while the bus was in motion, a trick with which I've always been impressed, and zoomed along. I found a seat near the door and folded my white-gloved hands one over the other. Everything was so familiar out of the window that I closed my eyes and made a mental list of my daily tasks.

I could see my nice sleek desk, shining with the touch of polish I've

given it every other morning for twelve years. I could see my typewriter, and I almost composed the first words that had to come out of it.

If I could get that letter and two others out before Mr. Ingraham came in, I could win one of those rare smiles of his and even, perhaps, that treasured remark, "Sara Ellison, I don't know what I'd do without you."

I might just as well admit it now as later. I'm in love with my boss and have been for at least eleven and half of those twelve years. I don't know what was the matter with me the first six months. Nervous about my duties, I guess, and afraid to look at him. When I did, I fell—all the way. Tall, ruddy, with serious and kindly blue eyes, I was sure almost at once that he, with his quiet, somber voice, his slightly formal manner, had nobody to understand him; certainly not anybody in the office, and above all, not his beautiful, spoiled, demanding wife. He was a man alone. Suddenly I was handed a torch, already aflame, and I carried it proudly, if secretly, every day of my life. It gave me a purpose, a reason for getting up, a hopeful, wonderful, exciting optimism for each day ahead of me.

So when the bus came to my stop, I got off as usual, with the same happy feeling of anticipation in my heart and the same hurry in my feet.

I was alone in the elevator with the operator, Joe, because everybody else in the office came piling in at the very last minute. "Mornin', Miss Ellison," he said, sounding surly, but then he often did. As I told him once, "It can't be much fun, you poor man, up and down and up and down and going nowhere." See what I mean? I'm always concerned with people. After that, Joe began to tell me his troubles, like most everybody does.

"Good morning, Joe," I answered pleasantly. "Isn't this a beautiful day?"

"What's beautiful about it?" he muttered. So I kept quiet, knowing that's the way he wanted it, and we didn't say another word all the way up to the forty-first floor.

The long corridor smelled clean and looked it, with all the doors proferring shining knobs. I counted off my steps—sixty-seven of them—to the pane of smoked glass that read in gold lettering: DALE INGRAHAM AND COMPANY. BUILDING AND PLANNING CONTRACTORS.

My key turned smoothly in the lock and I walked through the dear, familiar door. In the outer office there were four desks, set neatly, like pairs of twins, across from each other.

The pair on the left belonged to Melissa, the pretty, pretty thing, who

came to me for help with all her boy friends, and who did the typing for everybody; and George, the top salesman, whose desk was most often empty of him, but a mess atop until I couldn't stand it any longer and cleaned it up for him.

On the right, closest to the door, with the switchboard in front of her, Doris held sway. I mean she really held sway, officious with her plug-ins, and with hips that didn't know the meaning of dignity every time she took a step or two.

At the desk behind her, cornered away from the windows and the activity, was Mr. Mealie. Honest truth! He lived up to his name, with big glasses, pursed mouth, narrow shoulders, and all. A real bookkeeper too—he kept everything as spic and span and neat and honest as you could wish.

In my more egotistic moments I felt that Mr. Mealie was in love with me and working up his courage, over a couple of cups of coffee a week, to tell me so. It tickled me—I, who could love a man like Dale Ingraham with such loyalty and passion. Looking up pretty high, Mr. Mealie was.

Like almost all mornings, I stood for a moment looking at those desks with tenderness surging in me. They were my life, my family, the four of them: the smart brother, George; the naughty sister, Doris; the baby sister, Melissa. And Mr. Mealie? Well, an uncle maybe, or the boarder, you know? The one who was, quite simply, just *there*.

I kept my own office door locked, and nobody but Mr. Ingraham had the key. There really wasn't a sensible reason for it, no top-secret papers or anything like that. Just my own sense of privacy, plus the beautiful feeling I got when I unlocked it and knew that it led nowhere except to Mr. Ingraham—as if it were a small apartment where my love and I, in two rooms, shared a secret world.

When I reached in my purse for my key, I pulled out the stuff the mailman had handed me. I set it on my desk while I took off my immaculate white gloves, slipped out of my coat, and hung it in the minute closet, where soon Mr. Ingraham's topcoat would join it in delightful intimacy.

I sat down in my comfortable chair, surveyed my domain for a moment, and opened the first piece of mail. It was for special bargains in magazine subscriptions, little stamps you stick on things. I put it in the wastebasket at my feet. The second was the electric bill. The third was a letter from my Aunt June in the nursing home. It was thick and would be, I knew,

rambling and whining, so I put it aside for my lunch hour. The third was typed, addressed to me with my middle initial, and had no return address on it.

I opened it with a nail file because I couldn't seem to find my long letter opener. I hunted for a minute or two, a little worried, for I valued it a great deal. Mr. Ingraham had brought it to me when he and his wife returned from a trip to Spain. It was shaped like a small and perfect sword, with the hand-guard all etched in gold and enamel—beautiful.

With the letter in my hand, my eyes landed on the calendar. I thought, *There goes my noon hour*. It was Leila Ingraham's birthday and I always shopped for her gift from Mr. Ingraham.

Knowing Mr. Ingraham's generosity and income, I had often found myself doing a crazy thing. Birthday, Christmas, or anniversary, I'd walk into the most exclusive shops and pick out the flimsiest negligees, the most musky perfumes, the highest-fashion jewelry. All the way back to the office, and sometimes even alone at home at night, I'd picture myself wearing those lovelies, smelling exotic, looking alluring, with candlelight shimmering on the jewels. Mr. Ingraham would come up the walk . . .

I tore myself away from that dream, saving it till later, after I'd done today's shopping. I looked down at the paper in my hand and read the words quickly, as I had trained myself to do with the correspondence and the articles I read in the trade magazines, but for some strange reason these words might have been in a foreign language, so slow was my mind in a sort of double take:

It was because of what the note spelled out, of course: "Dear, dear Sara Ellison, sweetie-pie:

"This is to notify you that you won't have to wear out your precious feet today searching for something expensive and beautiful for Leila Ingraham, and that your boss will undoubtedly be late and highly disturbed if he ever does come to work.

"Because, you stupid, adoring fool, by the time you get this, Leila's broken body will have spent a dismal, chilly night in the canyon below the Ingraham house. Maybe even by the time you get this, it will have been found and you will be accused of the crime.

"And sweetie-pie, it's some crime! You'd hardly know her. That little Spanish letter opener, honed razor-sharp, does a real job.

"That isn't the point of this letter, really, although it was fun to write the above and wonder what your sickly-sweet face looks like as you read

it. If you're white and shaky now, dearie, hear this: YOU ARE GOING TO BE NEXT! You'd better start looking over your shoulder as of right now.

"It's none of your business why I killed Leila Ingraham, but you have the right to know why I'm going to kill you. I hate, most of all, women like you—slobbering and catering to married men, always so damned sweet and cheerful and do-gooding.

"So here you are. If they don't get you for the murder, with your fingerprints on that bloody, bloody opener, they'll find you sooner or later, dead as a doornail, a suicide from all that remorse!"

There was no signature, of course.

The whole little room went wild, whirling around me. It seemed to be filled with insane psychedelic colors and sounds. I don't know how long it went on. I suppose you could call it a sort of faint. When everything slowed and quieted, I began to search frantically for the letter opener. It wasn't there, not anywhere at all.

Then I started at the beginning of the letter, as if it were an important contract with a lot of fine print that I had to get straight for Mr. Ingraham. I took each word alone, searching for its separate meaning.

This time the world stayed still, except for my heart, which was like a bass drum, slow, steady, punching against every vein in my body.

"A joke," I whispered at first. "I don't have an enemy in the world. Everybody is my friend. I'm always so—"

Sickly-sweet, seemed to whisper back at me. *Slobbering and catering.*

Oh, I had an enemy all right. I had a real one:

After a while my mind, as if it had undergone some sort of a transfusion, began to work again. I looked at the envelope. It had a Los Angeles postmark, which is as bad as any needle in any haystack. The typewriter was a regular one, portable size, most likely. Every letter was so clean and clear I knew that it was fresh from a supply store, so no way of tracing any special little traits or quirks or tipped keys or fill-ins.

Who could try to trace it, anyhow? *Call the police*, my mind suggested. *Show them the letter. They can trace anything, the paper or something. They'll read the letter and know you've been threatened and give you some protection—*

No. They'll go to the canyon and find Leila Ingraham's body and the letter opener smeared with my fingerprints, of course—and blood too, most likely. What's to prove to them that I hadn't written the letter myself? Five would get you ten the only fingerprints on the paper were

mine too. In all the stories and movies, it's just the sort of thing a suspect does to throw suspicion away from himself.

Panic began to add a tickle in my throat to the pound of my heart, now located somewhere in the center of my stomach. What a neat little trap it was, carefully planned by somebody with a good, if warped, brain. I couldn't ask for help with that terrible letter staring me right in the face, without implicating myself in a murder which pointed directly at me.

The outside door opened softly and clicked shut. The panic turned to a sort of nuclear heat, threatening to burn me to a crisp. It was a moment before I could straighten up enough to look at the gold-fingered clock on the wall and see that it was eight-thirty, the time staff began to come in.

I had to hang onto the desk to pull myself up, like an old woman with arthritis. I had to cling for a time until some strength came back into my legs. Then I shambled across the soft rug, which threatened to trip me with every shuffle, and looked out of my door.

Melissa was hanging up her jacket on the wall hook beside her desk. She looked little and frail and pretty even from the back, with that long, smooth hair almost to her waist. She whirled when she heard my breath, harsh in the quiet place. "Sara," she said. "Oh, Sara . . ."

She ran across the room and flung herself into my arms. Automatically I patted her as I had so many times before, but I couldn't force the usual, "There now, there now," through my dry lips.

She wasn't crying, but when she lifted her head I saw that her eyes looked as if they were painted around with red eyeliner.

"I did it again," she cried, "and they almost caught me. If they ever do—if John or my family—" She stopped on a hiccup.

My family, I thought. Melissa and all the rest of them.

Melissa and I had a secret. I was the only person in the whole world who knew that she was a compulsive shoplifter. The lovely clothes and trinkets she wore to work, to her many dates and parties—and finally to go out with the boy she wanted so much to marry, who just last week had asked her the question she'd waited to hear—were smuggled from shops all over the city. Just last week she had made a promise to herself, to me, and indirectly to her young man, John. She had broken it.

Melissa could want to kill me, I thought shockingly. She could feel that I am the only one who threatened her.

Silly, crazy, you're going off your rocker, I told myself. This dear, pretty little thing couldn't hurt a fly.

On the other hand, who would ever believe that this dear, pretty little thing, walking so proudly in the shops, would know all of the tricks of hiding various treasures under her trim clothes?

Even as I was hating myself for thinking it, Melissa backed off and stared at me. There was a strange look in her eyes that I had never seen before.

"How do I know," she said slowly, spacing each word, looking neither very pretty nor very young, "that I can trust you, Sara? That you're not just pretending all this mother bit? That someday, when John and I are married—all that rich, rich married—you won't drag it out and blackmail—"

Dear Heaven, I thought, this is all a nightmare. My little sister, looking at me like that.

"She didn't have an enemy in the world . . ." The past tense frightened me all over again.

I began to shake.

The door opened behind me. Melissa made a quick move to her desk, settling down as if she'd been there for hours, flashing a quick, bright smile at George, who rushed through the entrance as if chased by the devil.

"What are you doing here fairly on time?" she cooed. I couldn't find the hard-faced, hard-voiced girl anywhere.

"Have to go to Chicago," George barked. He was a barker, all right. He'd have made a good one in a carnival, as a matter of fact. "A sharp dresser," they would have called him in my mother's time.

I stood behind Melissa, and it was as if I'd never seen George before. I noted that he had two deep-cut lines between his brows, equally deep-cut ones down either side of his full mouth. His brown eyes, which I had always thought of as those of a friendly beagle, a little sad and disillusioned, seemed hidden above the loose bags of skin that supported them.

Would George have a reason to kill me? my crazy mind asked. Even as it did, I watched him smooth his hand against Melissa's silken hair.

I heard him cry, "Sara-doll, do me a favor and help me unscramble this mess so I can get a briefcase filled, will you?" He was suddenly beside me with his arm tight around my shoulders.

George is my friend, I reassured myself. Of course he is. Even if, the new undercurrent thinking went on, I know that he's on the way to Vegas

instead of to Chicago on business. Even if he's into me for over two thousand hard-earned and harder-saved dollars—the dollars I used to cover, even from Mr. Mealie (no easy task), the money from an order which he blew in the gambling city, instead of turning it in.

His arm felt threatening instead of cozy, as it usually did. It seemed to be giving some secret pressure against my shoulder bone. Asking for more money? Letting me know it was Vegas again? Or sharing the secret of the letter which still lay on my desk?

I pulled myself abruptly from his grasp. I said, "I have so much to do, George. It's my busy morning."

I hurried into my office and shut the door. I sat, trembling, on the chair which was no longer comfortable. I tucked the letter in my right top drawer, the one that locked, and did just that.

I didn't want to see Doris come in. The way my mind was working, she had one of the best excuses of all of them to want to get rid of me.

I never took much of a vacation, but when I did I stayed near home. There was a motel about fifty miles south on the shore, not too expensive, quiet, where I could read and rest and think about how gorgeous the scenery would be if I were seeing it with Mr. Ingraham.

Last summer, August 14th, to be exact, I went out onto the balcony of that motel. Lying in deck chairs in the balcony section next door, in as fine a clinch as you can achieve in separate chairs, were Doris and a man I recognized instantly, despite his Bermuda shorts and flowered shirt. He was one of Mr. Ingraham's biggest customers, a married man with four children, whose pictures he proudly showed me trip after trip, year after year.

I tried to get out of my own chair, but it squeaked. The clinch was broken. The two of them were staring at me, both guilt and recognition written all over their faces. I managed to pull myself erect and walk proudly back into my room. I packed and checked out at once.

We never mentioned it, Doris and I. I tried, with as easy a manner as I could manage and with as bright a smile, to let her know that I understood my naughty sister, that I was safe as a tomb with secrets.

Heaven only knows, though, what she could have been reading into our daily contact. Or how much the man meant to her, or his reputation to him. The pair of them could have plotted the whole thing.

All of a sudden I wanted to cry. I wanted to cry for a thousand reasons which all crowded in on me at once, but mostly I wanted to cry for Sara

Ellison, who was so sweet and cheerful and really loved people, or when she didn't, fought like a tiger not to show it. It just seemed to me that my whole life, my whole attitude toward everything—even without any letter—was going right down the drain.

The truth of the matter was, I didn't have a real friend in the world—and I hadn't ever had one. You couldn't count Mr. Mealie. Great guns, Mr. Mealie had more reason to hurt me than anybody else. I'd been curt with him when he asked me out to dinner or to the movies. I'd been in a hurry when he wanted to share coffee on our breaks. I'd *overlooked* him. That was the worst—the way to stir people up more than any other. I had read that somewhere. Love, with a little man like Mr. Mealie, is just the thin other side of the coin of hate.

I pulled some tissues from the second drawer, blew my nose, daubed my eyes, got out my makeup kit, and repaired the visible part of the morning's damage. I stared at my own eyes in the little compact mirror for a long time. They were nice eyes, wide and kind and soft grey. I moved from feature to feature. I was not bad-looking. I was really pretty nice-looking. Why should anybody hate me so? Me, such a simple, loving, giving human being? Probably, though, even Joe, the elevator man, and the bus driver, hated to see me coming.

I guess I got all psychological in one lump. Suddenly I realized that nobody wants to be understood; that it's a burden on them to have somebody know something about them; that even when they confide in you they hate themselves for doing it. Even as they ask for help they resent the fact that they have to do it. They can't afford to hate themselves at all—consequently they turn the whole filthy load right on you. So there you are—threatened with murder, threatened with being a murderer, caught in the trap of a sick mind.

I realized that the office on the other side of my closed door was buzzing with activity now and that the day had truly started. The gold-fingered clock said almost ten. Where the time had gone I would never discover. Where Mr. Ingraham was, I could guess: at the police department, reporting the disappearance of his dear wife.

The thought of him settled down that part of me that felt so lost with enemies and without friends. Mr. Ingraham was my friend. When he finally came in I could show him the letter, hoping that he already knew what had happened to Leila, and that I couldn't possibly have done such a thing. I could turn it all over to him, and he would protect me.

He walked in straight, tall, and proud, ruddy and handsome. There was nothing in his appearance or in his manner to show that he might have found his wife's "broken body," or even had missed her for a moment.

"Busy day," he said. "Sara friend, we must be up and at 'em."

He hung his coat beside mine, smoothed it gently, and laid his hand for a short, strange moment on the collar of my camel's hair. "Will you come into my office?" he asked.

I followed him in. He shut the door and turned to look at me.

"There's something I have to tell you," he said, very serious, very quiet.

I nodded. "I know."

"Do you?" He kept looking at me. No man had ever looked at me like that before. I started to shake and it was a far different trembling from that caused by the letter.

"Sara," he said again, in a way I'd never heard, "do you know what you mean to me? Have you any idea?"

It was such a surprise, such a change of pace from my thinking, that all I could do was to shake my head numbly.

He smiled. He had a wonderful, warm smile,-but this one was special in a way I couldn't interpret. "You wouldn't," he said gently. "You're so dear, so unassuming. You are a giver, Sara. A wonderful, wonderful giver."

Everything was numb now, all shaking stopped.

"Sara," he said, very slowly; "I love you. I have loved you for a very long time. I have tried to stop it, tried to hold it back, tried to keep quiet, but I can't any longer. Do you understand? I can't. I love you. I want you."

He was across to me in one long stride. I was in his arms. It was exactly like all of those times I'd dreamed, only better now, real, all there. I never felt so safe in all of my insecure life.

I don't know how long it lasted, but I did know that when we finally drew a small distance apart, Mr. Ingraham must have been sure that I loved him too. Talk about being a giver!

"I want to ask something very big of you." His eyes were close to mine, brilliant and blue as heaven. His voice was soft, almost a whisper, and his words ran together, clear but very fast, as if he had thought them out for a long time.

"Leila left a note this morning. She is going to Bermuda with some of her gay drinking companions. She will be gone for six weeks. Six weeks, Sara."

I shuddered.

I pushed back all the words in that note except my own P.S. *Not six weeks. Forever.*

"I want you to go home and pack, quickly. I'll drive you and I'll wait for you. Then we'll go down the coast, the two of us, alone, together. Please, Sara, I've waited so long. We'll go down the coast to Mexico and we'll find a little place high in the mountains with a view of the sea and we'll love each other, and love each other . . ."

He was describing heaven. I was a robot. I was an automaton. I was hypnotized. I was nobody except what Dale Ingraham told me I was. I was in my coat and he was in his and we were walking through the door into the outer office. We were walking past the startled faces that were turned to us, past the still typewriters, the hushed switchboard.

At the door Mr. Ingraham turned, all grace and charm. "Sara is going with me to see about the final touches for Planned City. There are a lot of details that have to be cleared up. We probably won't be back today. Carry on."

He shut the door behind us.

I don't remember the ride down in the elevator, or even seeing Joe, or walking to the parking lot, or getting into the car. I was immersed in Dale Ingraham, his nearness, his voice, his clean scent, his hand on mine.

I didn't come to until my suitcase was half packed. Then I stood frozen. My mind clanged a warning like a church bell. I listened to it ring. Then I really began to think—or the real thinking was done for me, as if it came from the sanest mind in the world.

Mr. Mealie had a reason, a small reason, even if he were a psycho, to want to kill me. Melissa had a reason, a small reason, to want me out of the way. Doris had a reason, a small reason, to hate me enough to get rid of me. George had a reason, a small reason, for the same.

But not one of them had a real reason, large or small—a good, solid, airtight, passionate reason, to want to kill Leila Ingraham.

Except me, I thought sharply. I've hated her for years, flaunting herself in and out of the office, liquor on her breath as early as ten o'clock in the morning, leaving Mr. Ingraham with that slapped-across-the-eyes look on his face.

Except me. I hated her. I hated, hated, hated.

Except me. And except Dale Ingraham!

Those arms around me didn't seem to feel phony. That mouth didn't seem to lie. Heaven knows I hadn't had much experience, but that man who strode to reach me was a desperate man who, for some unknown reason, really seemed to love me, really wanted me. I was sure of that, and that alone.

How would he accomplish that, with a greedy wife who probably wouldn't divorce him, who taunted him if he told her of me? Who poured another drink, and took another lover, and laughed in his face? What would he do if she laughed once too often?

I sank down on the bed, every nerve writhing. I was packing to go to Mexico with a murderer—a murderer who sat right outside in his big car, ready to skip the country with "the other woman."

His words came back, the telltale, revealing words. "Leila left a note *this morning*." No, no, Leila had been dead—in that canyon—all night!

There was a blank here—a blank that waited for the worst, and yet most logical thought of all.

All right, discard the love. Any man can get worked up about any girl in his arms, and especially when he has fish to fry. Suppose he doesn't love you? Suppose, good-old Sara, that he has other plans. Sure, let's take it for granted he killed Leila. Then, let's take it for granted he had to throw all suspicion away from himself; he, who would be the first suspect of all to be interviewed:

He knew that canyon so well. He knew a place to hide her that would give him time—but not all the time in the world, as the bulldozers would soon begin to clear for the new houses on that property.

The letter was knowing in so many ways, now that I came to analyze it: Leila's birthday; the letter opener; "It's none of your business why I killed Leila Ingraham;" and me—"sickly-sweet" me, "slobbering and catering to married men."

Why, Mr. Ingraham hated *two* women—his wife and his office wife. Once rid of one, he found a dandy way to get rid of the other, at the same time he showed himself innocent as a babe.

Somewhere on the way to Mexico, not across the border because that could be traced with the big car, but somewhere, we would get out to take a look at the view. We would have a picnic perhaps, so that we'd not be seen in any restaurants together. We would stand near the edge

of one of those handsome cliffs, and push, slam, down goes Sara Ellison, down far enough to die, but not too far to be found—Sara Ellison, a suicide from “remorse” after killing the wife of the man she adored to madness.

They could all testify; certainly they could: Mr. Mealie and Doris, Melissa and George. I wasn't that good an actress. Probably it had been an office joke for a long time, the way I looked at him, sprang up at his every command, and served him devotedly in all those extra noon-hour ways.

I found myself, my purse thudding against my side, out the back door, climbing over neighboring fences, walking quickly to the street behind my own, getting on the bus with the unfamiliar name and the unfamiliar driver. I rode it the length of the line and back, again and again.

The day rode past with the bus. I was like ice all through me. I prayed that he had walked in and found me gone; that he had driven on to Mexico, getting out fast; that he had been so rattled when his careful plans had changed, the only thing he could think of was escape.

I prayed it, but toward dusk I knew one thing for certain—that letter, locked in my top right drawer, would bother him. It didn't prove that I was innocent, but if he ran away it wouldn't prove that I was guilty, either. Especially if I were alive to talk about it, and he was gone.

The next time the bus stopped in the heart of town, two blocks from the office, I got off. There was simple, unthinking compulsion in my fast walking. I didn't know what the letter would do for me, but it would do something. Dale Ingraham needed it—and my dead body. I needed it—and my live body. It sounded no crazier than the rest of the events of this crazy day—and I was going to get it!

The downstairs corridor looked dark despite the evening lights strung along it. The elevator door was open and the automatic switch was turned on. I pushed for the forty-first floor and it was the loneliest ride of my life. I even missed surly Joe.

I walked as quietly as if I were a burglar and had jimmied a window to get into the place. My heels hardly echoed. I turned the key in a mere whisper. The darkness of the outer office assailed me like a bad smell. I reached to turn on the switch and everything jumped out sharper than it ever had. Even the piled-high mess on George's desk looked starched and white.

The rug hushed my feet to nothing. The door of my cubicle was un-

locked as I had left it that morning. I kept it dark, knowing my way better than in my own bedroom. I fitted the small key in the desk drawer.

For a sudden, shocking moment I thought I couldn't feel the paper of the letter. Then my fingers caught and hugged it. It was there, and I knew how much I needed it by the way the air spilled out of my lungs and throat and mouth. I folded it into my purse. Not until then, so utterly encased was I in fear, in ice, did I hear the voice.

I swung on my heel and faced Dale Ingraham's office. There was a thin line of light under his door.

His voice came, weary, defeated, but with such cold hatred in it that I started to shake all over again. "You," it said softly. "You dirty—You did that? I'm going to kill you."

I thought wildly that he'd gone completely crazy. He's talking to himself, waiting for me to come for the letter, building up steam: I started to turn away, frantic to get out of there before he discovered me.

Then I heard the other voice—shrill, angry, foul of words.

I was in his office—the door slammed open before I knew what I was doing. I was running toward Dale. He stood in a hunched sort of crouch, moving slowly toward—Leila!

She stood there, lovely enough, but swaying drunkenly, her mink coat weaving with her movement. "Go ahead," she cried. "Go ahead. You haven't got the guts. But if you do, the letter will fix that, I promise you. The letter will fix that. Dear Sara. Dear Sara this, dear Sara that, I don't know how I'd get along without Sara, Sara, Sara. I fixed her little wagon. I gave her a day of hell, you can bet on that. And you can bet she's long gone by now."

Dale moved fast, but I was faster. I was there, holding him for dear life. Dear life.

"Don't," I cried. "Don't. It's what she wants. Don't you see? She's crazy as a loon. Insane. Dale, darling. Dale, no!"

Standing before him like that, surely looking melodramatic as I set my body in front of his, I turned and faced my enemy. I stared at such pure hate, such naked anger, that my spine stiffened into steel to put it down.

I knew two things with great surety: Leila Ingraham was indeed out of her mind, with liquor, with excesses, and with—yes—with jealousy.

I knew, too, in a great flash of joy, that Dale Ingraham really loved me—he loved *me*, Sara Ellison—and that the past twelve years of my life, of my caring, had not been in vain.

I turned to him. He came back to me, slowly, slowly, just as the blue came back to his eyes which were faded almost white with anger. He started to shake, as I had shaken all day, off and on. I helped him to the desk. He clung to me like a child.

"Sara," he whispered. "Sara."

"Sara," Leila mimicked. "Sara."

Something made me turn. There she was, coming toward me, my letter opener in her hand. I could tell by the way the light hit it that it was indeed honed razor-sharp.

I went after her. Tooth and nail and rush, I tore toward her. Sober, it would have been more of a struggle. Drunk as she was, I got hold of the opener with one grab.

"Get out of here!" I screamed. "Get the hell out of here, you—"

I knew about murder then, all right, with that sharp opener in my hand. I knew what could drive people to such an act.

She saw it. "Sara," she sneered. "Dear, good Sara." But she saw it. She turned unsteadily and walked out of the door.

That's the way it ended—almost.

There was the letter, you see. I found out the meaning of murder, yes; but I found out about blackmail too. That letter got Dale his divorce, and it kept Leila away from him. If she ever comes back that letter will put her in a mental institution—at the least—and she knows it.

The alimony was generous. I insisted on that. I really do believe in kindness, and now that I am proudly, cheerfully, sickly-sweetly and forever Mrs. Dale Ingraham, I can afford to be more generous than I ever was.

Know something? Sometimes it pays off.



What Difference Now?

by Clayton Matthews

Suicide, in our small east Texas town, was considered worse than murder. I suppose that was because most murders, the few we had, were committed in the heat of passion and for a reason, however wrong the reason might have been. But with suicide, well, the reasons for a person taking his own life were more often than not a mystery, known only to the person and his Maker. That was why folks were so horrified when they heard that Wade Ponder had rammed the muzzle of a .22 rifle into his mouth and blown his brains out.

I was more horrified than most. Not because I knew him well—I'd only seen him a half dozen times at the most—but that year, the year Mr. Ponder moved his family to Conroe County, I walked home from school with his daughter, Rita, almost every afternoon. I was a sophomore in high school, Rita, a freshman. The Ponders had rented the farmhouse up the road from Sheriff Jason Little's place.

Rita was slender, dark, solemn, with enormous black eyes. Her smile, when it came, was sudden and sweet. There was something about her, not secretiveness so much as a sense of carrying around a secret as heavy as stone. Often we would walk the mile from school without speaking a word.

"I swear there's something strange about that child," Aunt Beth said at supper one evening. "It's like she was born old. Sometimes she comes in here with Kyle for milk and cookies, Jason, and they sit the whole time, the two of them, without saying a word. Then she says a polite little thank you and slips out the door. Don't you two ever *talk*, Kyle?"

"Now leave the boy alone, sis," Sheriff Jason drawled. "I reckon he's sweet on her. I remember when I was his age, I didn't talk much either when I had a little old girl around grownups."

"Sweet on her! And Kyle hardly out of knee britches!"

"Age ain't little to do with it," Sheriff Jason said. Then he chuckled.

"Course I'd say the boy's got a bit of a problem. I thought he had a case on the new teacher, Vera Townes."

I felt my face burn like fire, and I concentrated on my supper.

Aunt Beth wasn't really my aunt, but they'd taken me in to raise after my real aunt died. Sheriff Jason was only a deputy, but he was the only law in our little town and all it needed, most times. He was plump, totally bald. Some folks claimed he never moved fast enough to keep the flies off, but I considered him the smartest man I knew.

Aunt Beth was wrong about Rita never talking. Sometimes a spell would hit her, and she'd talk a blue streak.

On our way out of town from school every day, we passed the filling station. More often than not, Sheriff Jason would be there on an upended box, a group of men gathered around. He didn't have an office; he used the filling station and the pop box instead. As he was fond of saying, ninety-nine per cent of the town's law problems could be settled right there. Usually the number of men was large. This was the Thirties, you understand, and unemployment was high. As we passed, Sheriff Jason would flap a hand at us, beaming, and go right on talking, black pipe fuming.

One late fall afternoon, the leaves turning brown and gold, Rita and I walked along the river bottom. The pecan trees were dropping nuts, and we hunted the heaped-up leaves for the red-shelled pecans. After we'd collected a goodly number, we sat down with our backs against a fallen log, cracked the pecans with our teeth, and ate the rich nutmeat.

This was one of the times Rita talked freely.

"You know what I want to do, Kyle, when I grow up?"

It was a game you played with the other kids, of course, but Rita had never played it with me. I looked at her intently. Her face wore a dreaming expression, yet it was shaded with melancholy as though her dreams were old and threadbare.

She didn't wait for me to answer. "I'm going to travel all over and sing on the radio and everywhere." She looked directly at me. "Do you believe me?"

"Sure, Rita," I said quickly. "Sure, I believe you."

A flicker of scorn crossed her face. "No, you don't. But I am. You wait and see."

She closed her eyes tight, tilted her head back, and began to sing. Her voice was clear and true and sweet. I'd heard her sing before, and I liked

to listen to her, but her choice of songs always made me uncomfortable. She sang the honky-tonk jukebox songs, songs about hopeless passions, unfaithfulness, dolorous songs of tawdry loves, songs she shouldn't even know. The one she sang this day, "It Makes No Difference Now," told of an unfaithful lover and the one left behind who no longer had anything to live for. I'd heard that the song had brought on a rash of suicides.

Rita finished singing and said, "If you knew how to play the guitar, Kyle, we could travel together, you playing and me singing."

I was about as musical as a rusty rain barrel, yet I said eagerly, "I could learn, Rita."

Suddenly her face closed up in that way it had, and I doubted she even heard me. In one lithe motion she got to her feet and started off. I had to hurry to catch up with her.

I had yet to meet Anne Ponder, Rita's mother, having only seen her at a distance. Rita remedied that on this Friday afternoon. She invited me, for the first time, to walk on home with her for milk and cookies. She did it with a flounce, an air of defiance, as though daring me to accept.

Mr. Ponder hadn't rented the farm, only the house. He wasn't a farmer. He was a farm implement salesman and traveled a great deal, which explained why we saw little of him. Nobody could understand why he hadn't rented a house in town.

Sheriff Jason, scorning gossip as always, had said, "I don't see anything wrong with his renting that old house. Run down as it is, it costs less rent than living in town. Besides all that, it's his business."

Rita's mother I judged to be about fifty; later, I learned she was actually under forty. She was very thin and careworn, which was unusual for a farm woman—except she wasn't a farm woman. It was easy to see where Rita got her solemn expression; I never saw her mother smile once. The kitchen was sparsely furnished but clean. The worn wooden floor was still damp from a recent scrubbing.

Mrs. Ponder was busy cooking supper on a wood cookstove, her face flushed with heat. When Rita introduced us, she pushed a strand of damp graying hair out of her eyes and said, "Howdy, Kyle. Rita has told me about you." Her voice held a complaining note, as though Rita's information only added another burden to an already heavy one.

Her cookies weren't as good as Aunt Beth's. They were sugar cookies, stale, and too sweet; and the milk was store-bought, not cow-fresh.

Rita and I sat at the table and ate in our usual silence. Mrs. Ponder moved about with a tired step, also without speaking. I grew more and more uncomfortable and was trying to think of an excuse to get away when I heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

The footsteps came on toward the kitchen, and that was the first time I saw Mr. Ponder up close. He was slender, delicate looking. It was clear where Rita got her dark good looks. He wore a suit, a white shirt and tie, and was carrying a suitcase. I guess I gaped at him, for the only folks you saw in our part of the country those days wearing a suit and tie on weekdays were schoolteachers and preachers. The only time I'd seen Sheriff Jason in a suit was at a funeral.

Rita's face lit up. "Daddy!"

"Hi, honey. I didn't know you were home from school yet." He came across to the table and chucked her under the chin, his inquiring gaze on me.

"Daddy, this is Kyle . . ."

"Glad to know you, Kyle." He held out his hand, and I jumped to my feet, gulping.

Mrs. Ponder said, "Ain't you even staying for supper?" The complaining note was stronger in her voice.

He glanced over at her, his face expressionless. "I reckon not, Anne. I have to see somebody over in the next county first thing Saturday morning. It'll take me most of the night to get there as it is."

Mrs. Ponder banged a pan down on the stove. ". . . never stay home . . . always off . . . should be with his family . . ."

Her face was averted, her voice a mutter, and I only caught the few words, but I guess Mr. Ponder'd heard it all before. He said mildly, "It's the way I make my living, Anne." He glanced at Rita. "See you in a few days, honey."

Rita was looking down at the table. She murmured something I didn't catch. Mr. Ponder's face was shadowed, his eyes brooding. He raised one hand in a half-gesture, then let it fall. He nodded to me and left the room with his suitcase.

Something had changed in the kitchen. Rita didn't look up once; and I saw she was kneading her hands in her lap. Mrs. Ponder banged pots and pans around, her back as stiff as an ironing board. As soon as I heard Mr. Ponder's car start up and drive away, I bolted the last of my cookie and fled. Neither Rita nor her mother spoke to me as I left.

I reckon Sheriff Jason was right about my being sweet on Rita. He was also right about Miss Townes. She came to town about the same time as the Ponders, maybe a week or so before. Miss Townes was the new English teacher in our school. I was in love with her from that first day in her sophomore English class. After I got acquainted with Rita two weeks later and started walking her home from school, I was torn between two loves.

Miss Townes was short, pink as a sunrise, with copper-bright hair and a disposition as patient and sweet as any I've ever seen in a schoolteacher. English had always been my worst subject; now I got all A's. Of course I was in love with her. Who wouldn't be? But the ten years difference in our ages put her beyond my reach; I could only worship from afar.

There were others in our town to whom the age barrier didn't apply. They slicked down their hair, polished their boots, and came at her from all directions. "Like hornets buzzing their dauber nests," Sheriff Jason said. "Not like bees around a honeycomb. Ain't much honey sticking to our boys."

They buzzed to no purpose. She shied away from all of them with a smile and a kind word.

We didn't know much about Miss Townes. Gossip had it that she came to us from a Fort Worth school. Nobody could figure out why she'd picked our backwater community. After the first few weeks of school she took to going away weekends. Nobody knew where, but it was thought she had folks in Fort Worth she visited. Miss Townes didn't say and passed off any questions with her gentle smile.

That Friday afternoon on the river bottom with Rita put me in bad with Miss Townes. She had assigned us a theme to write over the weekend. In my excitement over what Rita had said, I clean forgot the theme. I mooned around most of Saturday, daydreaming of the time when Rita and I would travel all over, her singing, me playing the guitar. Late Saturday afternoon I found an old guitar, one string missing, in the attic. I fooled around with it up there, plucking at the strings until my fingers were raw. I started in again Sunday morning.

By the middle of the afternoon Sheriff Jason had had enough. He came to the top of the stairs and called up, "For Lord's sake, boy, you're about to drive me right out of my mind with that awful noise! Now you just stop it! What's got into you, anyway?"

Hurt to the quick, I plunged out of the house and gloomed around the

river bottom until supper. It wasn't until bedtime that I remembered the theme, and by then it was too late.

I was the only one in my class who didn't turn in a theme. Miss Townes said in her soft voice, "I'm disappointed in you, Kyle. You'll just have to stay in after school and work on it."

I was unhappy having to tell Rita I couldn't walk her home, but when I was in Miss Townes' classroom after school it wasn't so bad. It was the first time I'd ever been alone with her. Needless to say, I got little work done. I sat in the front row and kept glancing up at her behind the big desk. She was busy grading papers and didn't notice, or pretended not to.

After fifteen minutes I began to fidget. Finally I burst out, "Miss Townes . . ."

She looked up, brown eyes intent on me. "Yes, Kyle?"

"I'm sorry about this old theme! I just forgot! I shouldn't have but I did."

After a breathless moment she smiled. "I'm sorry, too, Kyle. But I'm more disappointed than anything. That's why I kept you . . ."

She broke off, her gaze going past me. Her eyes widened, and I saw her bite down hard on her lower lip.

I looked around. Mr. Ponder was striding toward the desk. He swept past me as though I wasn't there. He leaned toward her, his knuckles whitening where he gripped the desk. "Why didn't you show up Friday night?"

Her glance jumped to me, one hand going to her throat. "Please," she whispered, "you shouldn't be here like this!"

"I had to! I had to know! Why didn't you come? Is it something I did?"

"Wade . . . It's not you. At least nothing you've done. It's us. We can't go on this way." She was looking directly at him now; I was forgotten. "You should never have followed me here from Fort Worth. And when you did, I should never have taken up . . ." She slammed a small fist down on the desk. "But it has to stop! That's why I stayed home Friday."

"You can't mean that, honey. Not after all we've been through."

He seized her hand, and she snatched it away. "I do mean it! I never meant anything more. If you don't stop, I'll quit my job and go away again. It's all over, Wade. Believe me, it is."

Mr. Ponder stared at her for a long while. She faced him without
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flinching, head thrown back. Then his shoulders slumped, and he turned away toward the door. He went right past me without a sign of recognition.

Miss Townes stood looking after him long after the door had slammed behind him. I made a small sound in my throat. She started and glanced at me, her eyes misted with tears. "Oh, Kyle!" She gestured. "You run on home. Go on now."

I went with dragging feet.

The next afternoon I left Rita at the yard gate to her house and trudged on toward home. We'd had even less to say than usual. I'd desperately wanted to tell her about what I'd overheard the day before, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was about fifty yards away from the house when I heard the shot. I ran back at full speed. As I started up the porch steps, Rita pushed through the screen door and hurried to meet me. Her eyes were very dark, her face very white, yet she was perfectly composed when she spoke.

"No, Kyle, don't come in. Run home and fetch Sheriff Jason. Tell him to please hurry."

By the time I came back with Sheriff Jason, a crowd had collected in the front yard, but not a soul ventured beyond the porch.

"You stay out here, Kyle," Sheriff Jason said sharply, and he hurried inside.

Questions flew at me, none of which I answered. Of course, all I knew was that a shot had been fired inside, but I sensed that something terrible had happened. It was close to a half-hour before Sheriff Jason came back outside. He ordered one of the men to go into town and phone the sheriff and the undertaker over at the county seat. He refused to answer any questions and told everybody to go home. Grumbling, they began drifting away. I hung back, hoping for a glimpse of Rita, but he saw me and called out sternly, "You go on home, too, Kyle. Go on now. Tell Beth I'll be late for supper."

At home I told Aunt Beth all I knew. We waited supper for him, but it was long after dark when Sheriff Jason let himself in the back door, looking bone tired and very solemn. I'm sure it cost Aunt Beth a great deal of will power, but she didn't ask a question until we were seated around the supper table. Then she said, "Well, Jason?"

Sheriff Jason sighed, scrubbed a hand down across his face, and told us. He had found Mr. Ponder in an upstairs bedroom. He had been fully clothed, lying on his back on the bed, a single shot .22 rifle by his right

hand. The bullet had gone through the roof of his mouth and into his brain. Rita and Mrs. Ponder had been of very little help. Rita said she had been barely inside the house when the shot sounded, and her mother said she had been in the kitchen.

"Killed himself!" Aunt Beth clucked. "Now why would he do a thing like that?"

Sheriff Jason didn't look at her. "Nobody seems to know."

"Suicide . . . The last time somebody killed himself around here was way back when I was a little girl."

He growled, "You'd like it better if he was murdered?"

"Well, then at least we'd know . . ." She bit the words off.

"Know what, woman? A man's lying dead. I can't see it matters a great deal why."

"It matters to me! And it'll matter to other folks, too, you wait and see!"

She was right in that. It seemed to matter to a lot of folks. Oh, nothing was said until after the funeral. Practically the whole town turned out, mostly from curiosity, I reckon, since the Ponders were too new to be well-known. It was a fitting day for a funeral, grey and somber, with dripping skies. Mrs. Ponder was in a state of near collapse, leaning on Rita's arm, with Sheriff Jason supporting her on the other side. Miss Townes was there, wearing black, and standing off by herself. She was pale and drawn, yet she didn't shed a tear that I could see. She left before the first clod of wet dirt hit the coffin, and I never saw her again. I later learned that she had resigned her job even before the funeral.

Two days later I was walking past the filling station and saw several men bunched around Sheriff Jason. I was alone; Rita hadn't yet returned to school. I edged in close and listened.

"Why'd he do it, Jason?"

"I ain't the least idea. Who knows about a thing like that?"

"Weren't nothing wrong with his health, was there?"

"Not that I know of, but then I wasn't his doctor."

"Ain't right, a man like that killing himself. Not too old, healthy, with a family to take care of, and a man with the ladies, too, the way I hear it."

Sheriff Jason loosed an exasperated snort. "So what would you all have me do?"

"We don't know. Something. You're the sheriff, ain't you?"

"I reckon I am," Sheriff Jason said dryly. "Leastways, everybody keeps telling me I am; times like this."

They kept at him and kept at him for the next few days, but it didn't seem to bother him too much. Aunt Beth was as bad as the others. She was at him every day. At supper one night she said, "It's been a week now and you're no closer to knowing why that man killed himself. Are you, Jason?"

"I reckon not, sis," he drawled. "But I also reckon it'll come out in the wash."

"You always say that!" She slammed his supper plate down in front of him. "You make me so mad!"

A soft knock sounded on the kitchen door. Aunt Beth hustled over and admitted Rita and her mother. It was the first time I'd seen Rita since the funeral.

She had her mother by the arm and marched her right up to the table. "Sheriff Jason . . . Mama has something to say to you."

Sheriff Jason sighed. "Yes, I've been expecting you . . . Both of you." He got to his feet and pulled out a chair. He said gently, "All right, Mrs. Ponder, tell it in your own way. Just take your time."

Mrs. Ponder looked as though she hadn't eaten since the funeral. It didn't seem possible, as thin as she had been, but she must have lost ten pounds. The skin on her face was drawn tight across her cheekbones, and her eyes were sunken and had a dull look. She placed both hands flat on the table and talked in a voice so low I had to strain to hear her.

"He was going away with . . . with her. He was leaving me . . . leaving his family. A man shouldn't do that. I put up with his running around. I came along when he followed her here. I guess a person can just take so much." All of a sudden her eyes flooded with pain, then went dead again. "I told him I wouldn't stand for it. He laughed at me. He said I'd stand for anything he wanted me to. I waited until he lay down for a nap. Then I put that old .22 in his mouth and pulled the trigger." Her glance moved to Sheriff Jason's face. "And that's all, Sheriff. That's the way it happened. Rita said I should come tell you."

"Yes, Mrs. Ponder, it's better you did." He got up and walked over to Aunt Beth, who had been listening dazedly. He said softly, "Well, sis, you surely got your killing."

She started. "But I didn't want . . . You *knew!* You knew all the time!"

"I didn't know. I thought she had killed him, yes, but I hadn't a prayer

of proving anything. I figured she'd come to me in due time, or the girl would see that she did."

Rita was standing beside her mother, holding her hand in a tight grip. Mrs. Ponder was staring straight ahead into nothing.

Sheriff Jason crossed to them. In the gentlest voice I'd ever heard him use he said, "You'll have to come along with me, Mrs. Ponder. You, honey, you'd better spend the night here. Beth'll fix you up a place to sleep."

Rita's head went back. "No, Sheriff Jason, I'll go along home."

He studied her for a moment, then he turned to lead Mrs. Ponder out. Rita and I followed them into the back yard and watched as he put Mrs. Ponder into the Model A and drove off.

Rita started away without a word to me.

"Rita . . ." She paused without looking at me. "What about our plans?"

"Our plans?"

"What we were talking about on the river bottom. About when we grow up."

She faced me. "What difference does all that make now, Kyle?" Her eyes blazed, and her voice burned. "What difference now?"

She turned and walked away, walked out of the light and into the darkness.

That was the last time I saw her. Two days later she went out to Abilene to live with an aunt and uncle, but sometimes on chilly fall afternoons, walking alone on the river bottom, I would stop, head cocked, sure I could hear the clear sweet run of her voice.

When I, finally, grew up and would be in a bar or a restaurant, and a new record, a new female vocalist, would start up on the jukebox, a soft-stringed guitar providing background music, I would hurry to check on the name of the singer, certain it was Rita—but it never was.



All of a Sudden

by John Lutz

Detective Sergeant Sam Day stood near the swinging partition that gave access to the area behind the long, scarred wooden counter. The faint odor of sweat and varnish rose from the counter, a familiar odor to Day. He shifted his weight to his other leg and felt a trickle of perspiration down his back. It was hot outside, almost ninety, and the old Eighth Precinct air conditioner just wasn't doing it. Off to one side the switchboard operator sat, marking his chart to keep track of the Eighth Precinct cars, his ears alert to calls for those cars and those cars only, picking them out almost automatically from the constant stream of static-filled chatter that blared from the metal speaker near him.

Day saw that the door to the lieutenant's office was open about quarter way, and he heard voices from inside. Laughter, loud talking, silence, then, "Oh, sure, sure, Harry," somebody said with emphasis, and there was another laugh.

Sighing with impatience, Day leaned against the counter. The desk sergeant, old Hap Kramer, continued bringing his records up to date, hunched over the long counter as if he were oblivious to anyone else's presence. Near the other end of the room several younger, uniformed officers lounged, talking while one of them finished a report to give to the clerk to type. Behind them was the door to the holdover, about half full now, because the night had barely begun.

The Eighth Precinct house was a crummy place, Day reflected. It was really an old converted four-family flat, in a crummy neighborhood among crummy people. Some of the people he had to work with were crummy too.

Day caught himself and made his mind take some other tack. It was no good thinking that way. He'd chosen this for his career, and he was a thirty-four-year-old detective now, doing well enough . . . under the circumstances.

Still, it got to a man every so often: the squalor of the job, the unappreciative, misunderstanding, even despising public. There was the hopelessness of trying to get convictions, of long hours of hard work going for nothing—hours he knew he should be spending at home with Audrey and his boy Greg. Sam Day had risen fast enough in the department, but only to a point, it seemed. Suddenly, men with less ability, even less time on the force, began to pass him, were given more responsibility, chances to prove themselves. He adjusted the chafing shoulder strap of his holster and silently cursed the heat, and despite himself he looked around him again and wondered if it were worthwhile.

The lieutenant's door opened all the way as there was another loud laugh, and a short man with a yellow face and thin wisps of black hair walked out, smiling to himself: Jack Vectin, Twelfth Precinct alderman. Idly, Day wondered what he'd been talking about with the lieutenant. Not that it mattered.

"*Boston Eight*," Day heard the speaker near the switchboard operator blare, "go to 538 Chambers Street and investigate a reported cutting."

Nothing for me, Day thought to himself as he half listened to the patrol car's laconic reply. For the present he'd been assigned to the burglary detail.

Then Lieutenant Harold Weston appeared in the doorway to his office. A man of medium height with a deceptive smoothness to his round face, a deceptive blandness to his eyes, he was acting captain in charge of the Eighth Precinct. He placed his cigar in his mouth and waved for Day to enter.

"How you been making it?" he asked Day, as he settled himself behind his desk and motioned for Day to sit in a nearby small wooden chair.

"Good enough, I suppose, Lieutenant." Day wondered why he'd been summoned, wished the man would get to the point.

"Don't get the idea I asked you in here to chew you out," Lieutenant Weston said. "Nothing like that. More just a word of caution."

"Caution?" Day began to feel uneasy. He knew he was talking to a much smarter man than appeared on the surface to anyone.

The lieutenant looked thoughtful, chewed on his cigar. "Maybe more like advice. I learned a few hours ago that Fred Brent left town and nobody knows where he went."

Day was silent; he knew what that meant. Brent had committed a large-scale burglary at Hollman's Department Store. The police were sure he

did it, and in time they would have gathered enough evidence to bring him in. Gathering that evidence was Day's job, and the fact that Brent had cut and run meant that Day had not been quite careful enough and had somehow alerted him.

"A month down the drain," Day said to the lieutenant, "unless he comes back."

"He won't be back," Lieutenant Weston said, "not Brent. Somebody tipped him you were investigating him. You asked somebody the wrong questions."

Day didn't answer. He didn't feel like saying he was sorry. He felt like telling this good cop, Lieutenant Weston, just what he could do with the Brent case.

"You've been moving in on them too soon and too fast," the lieutenant said. "Hard as it is to get convictions these days, we've got to be sure."

"You and I both know he's guilty," Day said, and he knew as soon as he'd spoken that it was an inexcusably dumb thing to say.

Lieutenant Weston stared at him. "Sure, *we* know it, Day. But the judge doesn't, and the jury doesn't, and it doesn't matter a damn to them what we think we know. Our job isn't to decide guilt or innocence. You know that. We gather evidence we can hand to the prosecutor. We don't let personal feelings enter into what we do."

"I don't need a police academy refresher course, sir."

Lieutenant Weston laid his cigar in a brass ashtray and looked hard at Day, anger darkening his round face. "I told you, Day, this is no chewing-out. No need to get so damn upset. Just don't do it again."

Day nodded.

The lieutenant picked up his cigar, then leaned back and seemed to study Day. "I know it's hard," he said. "It's always been hard."

"I suppose it has, sir." Day really didn't want to argue with Lieutenant Weston. Like most of the other officers, he had respect for the man's professionalism and candor. A direct, almost crude man despite his shrewdness, Lieutenant Weston had a way of always letting you know where you stood with him.

"You've blown a few lately, Day," the lieutenant said. "You're expected to be more careful."

Again Day nodded.

"I want you to take the office upstairs for the next two weeks. Handle the incoming calls while Rogers is on court duty."

"All right, sir." Day tried to keep the disappointment from his voice. The desk job he was being told to man was an empty, monotonous sort of job, with little real responsibility. It was always looked at as something of a putdown when a detective was assigned to it when Rogers was away.

The lieutenant was bent over his desk now, shuffling through some papers and ignoring Day. Day got up to leave.

"Remember," the lieutenant said as Day reached the door, "more careful, huh?"

Day walked from the precinct house, drove the unmarked car to the police garage and left it. Then he drove his own car home to his apartment on Grant Road.

He parked behind the apartment building and got out of the car to go upstairs. A tall, dark-haired man with blue eyes and a boyish face, he looked like anything but a detective, and right now he was wondering if he were a detective. More and more lately, the dream of police work was conflicting sharply with the reality.

At least he'd work fairly regular hours on Rogers' job, he figured, as he opened his front door. Audrey would be glad to hear that.

Day's four-year-old son Greg ran to him when he came in. Grinning, Day turned the small boy away and slapped his rear with mock viciousness. After wrestling for a few minutes, Greg playfully ran off to his room.

Audrey was in the kitchen, setting the timer on the oven. "I heard you come in," she said.

Day smiled. "I guess you couldn't help but hear it."

He looked at her, slim and beautiful in slacks and a sleeveless white blouse; but the lines about her eyes and about the corners of her mouth were new and didn't look as if they belonged. Day blamed himself for those lines.

"I'll have a desk job for a few weeks," he said, hoping to make her smile. "Daytime hours for sure. I was lucky to get it."

She didn't smile, only nodded and gave whatever she'd placed in the oven a final check.

"I thought maybe we'd eat out tonight," Day said.

"Too late for that. You should have called."

"Too busy," Day lied.

"Anyway," Audrey said, "I've got a roast in. That's your favorite."

"Have a decent day today?"

"Good enough," she said.

"Greg behave?"

"Good enough."

Day turned away in discomfort. This was the kind of conversation they were having lately: trivial, circling conversations.

After supper that evening Day played with Greg, then watched TV for a while—news, followed by a program about some kids who solved crimes—but he couldn't keep his eyes away from Audrey, from the deepening lines in the smooth flesh of her face. She was only thirty-one. He wondered what she'd look like at thirty-five. At forty.

Things seemed to go better at home during the first week of the desk job, but work was a dull stretch of time that caused a backache. Nothing seemed to break the monotony, and Day wondered how it would be to have a steady desk job. Probably Lieutenant Weston wanted him to wonder that.

Then one clear morning, as he was driving away from the apartment on his way to work, something registered in Day's mind.

The small, tan foreign car behind him had been behind him yesterday morning, and there were other times he'd seen it in his rear-view mirror during the past week or so. His memory was jarred by the slightly bent aerial on the car's fender, the dented grille.

Without moving his head, Day kept an eye on the car in his mirror as he drove. The driver of the car was alone, but he never drew near enough for Day to make out his features. When Day was a block from the entrance to the precinct parking lot, he saw the little tan sedan turn a corner behind him, so that it was impossible for him to glimpse the license.

During the rest of that week Day noticed the tan car only once more, one day as he was driving to a restaurant for lunch. He didn't waste time thinking too much about the tan car because he really didn't have enough information to think about, but in the back of Day's mind was the knowledge that the car turning up so often behind him was more than the coincidence of someone happening to drive the same routes as he did, and at about the same times.

That Saturday afternoon he was at the Quick Foods supermarket down the street from his apartment, looking for barbecue sauce, when he happened to glance through the wide windows past the checkout counters. The tan car was parked next to a line of empty grocery carts.

The driver was almost certainly in the store, but Day wasn't going to bother searching for him. He knew he wouldn't have to.

"Detective Sergeant Sam Day?"

The voice behind him was low and even, with a sarcasm in it that never quite surfaced.

Day turned around. The man who'd spoken was of average height and build, wearing expensive slacks and a sport shirt. He had a face to match his voice, regular features, rather long nose, and a mouth that was almost curved in a sarcastic smile. Sam knew the face but couldn't match it with a name or place.

The man took care of that for him. "Bill Grindle's my name," he said. "And you've probably seen me around."

Now Day remembered where he'd seen the face. "The only place I can remember seeing you is in your mug shots," he said. "Burglary, isn't it?"

Grindle nodded. "Three arrests, one conviction."

"I have noticed your car, though," Day said. "You've been following me for about a week. I would now like to know why."

Now Grindle did smile, but his eyes never blinked.

"That's why I came here, to let you know. It so happens I've got something to tell you."

That surprised Day. Grindle had never been known to be a police informer.

"I've been watching you, Sergeant Day. You haven't been doing too well at your job, work's getting you down, like it gets a lot of them. A smart man eventually realizes what's going on."

"Going on?"

"In the department, I mean. The way most of the higher-ups got to where they are."

Day felt the anger come alive in his stomach and stepped forward. "Are you making me a proposition, Grindle?"

Grindle showed not the slightest sign of fear. "Now, Sergeant, I know you're a dedicated man, an idealist, but it's time to combine idealism with practicality. I wouldn't suggest anything to you that your superiors on the force hadn't done to get where they are. They realized earlier than you what they needed to do to be more efficient police officers. They knew they had to have their contacts on the other side to find out things for them."

Day still hadn't made out Grindle's game. It sounded now as if the man might want to sell some information, but that didn't quite add up.

A woman pushing a loaded cart came down the aisle, stopping to pick out a jar of pickles, and the two men waited until she'd gone.

"How would you like to solve a burglary next week, Sergeant?" Grindle asked in his soft voice.

"You know the answer to that," Day said irritably. "Keep talking."

"There's an estate out in the south end that's going to be burglarized sometime next week by two men, both old pros. Arresting either one of them would mean solving a lot of burglaries that have happened in the past year or so, a real cleanup that makes for better statistics."

"And you want money for telling me when and where," Day said.

"Not exactly; Sergeant. I plan to do more than just tell you when and where. I plan to tell you everything."

"In exchange for?"

"There's an expression, Sergeant, '*quid pro quo*.' Something for something. You've heard of it?"

"I didn't realize you were so well educated. Stop talking around it and get to the point."

Grindle fixed cold eyes on Day for a moment, then nodded. "The point is, if I don't say any more to you, that burglary's going to happen and I'm going to be richer."

Day frowned and sighed. He didn't like the direction the conversation was taking. He didn't like this habitual crook keeping him on a string, keeping him wondering.

"Right, Sergeant," Grindle said, "I'll be one of the two burglars. And I'm willing to tell you how you can arrest my partner. You'll have him red-handed enough for a sure conviction."

"And what about you?"

"Why, I get away."

"With the loot?"

Grindle nodded. "All of it instead of half. And you get a feather in your blue cap."

Day clenched and unclenched his right fist. "How would you like me to take you in for attempting to bribe an officer?"

The sarcastic smile spread on Grindle's lean face. "How would you like to try to prove that? There's no need to get angry, Sergeant. I'm doing you and myself a favor. In a way, it's your duty to take me up on the deal—either it's one of us or simply neither of us."

"Then you'll be holding the whole thing over my head. No, thanks."

Grindle spread his hands. "Holding *what* over your head? How could I tell on you without putting myself in jail? And who'd believe me, anyway?"

He had a point, Day had to admit. Maybe the best thing was to pretend to go along with him, tell the department, and nab both of them.

"Who's your partner going to be?" Day asked.

"Ned Davis."

Day's interest sharpened. Ned Davis would be quite a catch, one of the top burglars in the city.

"You have some score to settle with him?" Day asked.

"I've got my reasons," Grindle said blandly. "He'll be tucked neatly away and he'll never suspect me."

"I'll think about it. All right?"

"Sure, Sergeant."

"Get in touch with me in a few days. And I don't want to see that damn car of yours behind me again."

"Sure, Sergeant. Anything else?"

"Yeah," Day said, "where's the barbecue sauce?"

All that next week, Day thought about Grindle's offer. He knew it wasn't meant to be a one-shot proposition. Grindle was willing to hand over a lot of ex-friends and a lot of information for safety and virtual immunity for himself.

Why shouldn't Day take him up on it? Ethics? He had found in the past several years that the whole world was unethical. Also, what was in it for Day? No profit of any kind. Promotions maybe; satisfaction in his job.

With a start he realized that dealing with Grindle *would* give him satisfaction; and it would rid society of some of its most proficient mal-factors, while one would go free.

What really made up Day's mind was that he waited too long. He'd put Grindle off twice, trying to decide. Then he realized that after this long the department would know he'd been vacillating. They'd ask him why he hadn't said something sooner, and he'd have no good answer for that question.

All the whole thing would amount to would be another grey mark on his record.

The next time Grindle contacted him, Day told him it was a deal. They

arranged to meet later and talk over the details, and after Day hung up the phone he sat quietly for a long time. He didn't feel the same as he had before the telephone call, and he knew he never would feel the same again.

It didn't matter how he felt, he told himself. There was Audrey to think about now; Audrey and Greg. He didn't want to retire on a sergeant's pension twenty years from now, and that was the way things were heading.

Day and Grindle met at the Bangkok Inn, a little lounge with an Oriental motif. Over drinks they worked out the details, and it was agreed that Grindle would telephone Day a few days before the burglary so he could devise a plausible reason for being at the scene.

The details of the plan were simple enough to have that "can't fail" sureness about them. The residence to be burgled was the Kray estate on Farnham Road. It was a large house set well off the road on three or four acres. Grindle and his partner had already cased it and decided to go in through a side window. They would leave their car parked in a secluded spot near a grove of trees on Farnham, and when they'd got what they'd come for, leave by the same way they'd entered, cutting back across the property to the car. The main item in the big house that had attracted their attention was Jackson Kray's valuable coin collection. Grindle would see that he'd be the one carrying that and whatever cash they found.

Day would be waiting near the car, surprise them when they came toward it, and order them to halt. Grindle would run, Day would fire a warning shot over his head, then another shot that would miss him.

At this point in the planning Grindle informed Day with a smirk that in case one of the shots did hit him, he'd taken care to see that the police department would subsequently learn about the arrangement they'd made, from letters he'd left with his wife.

"She's the only other soul who'll know about this," Grindle said. "But we're close. I'm a family man and I trust her. She knows this is like a business with me."

"And what if Ned Davis runs too?" Day asked.

"You *don't* miss him," Grindle said, draining the last of his drink.

That was something Day refused to let worry him too much. An experienced burglar like Ned Davis was not apt to run with a loaded revolver aimed at him.

Almost a week passed before Grindle called Day at home. Day moved around the corner, playing the long telephone cord out behind him, so that Audrey couldn't possibly overhear the conversation.

"Next Thursday night at eleven," Grindle said, no trace of the sarcasm in his telephone voice. "Jackson Kray's going out of town."

"You sure you've got everything worked out?" Day asked nervously. "I mean, what about alarms? A watchdog?"

Grindle laughed, a low, confident chuckle. "You do your job, Sergeant Day, I'll do mine. Between the two of us we should rise high in our professions."

The tension in Day mounted as the time for the actual burglary and the apprehension of Ned Davis drew nearer. A few days before the action he mentioned to some of his fellow officers that an informant had told him the Kray residence was due to be hit. This caused no great alarm, and didn't even particularly attract attention. Daily, informants passed a steady flow of tips to various detectives, and many of them turned out to be untrue.

The night of the burglary Day got permission from Lieutenant Weston to take a uniformed officer on a stake-out at the Kray estate. They took Day's unmarked car and got to the Kray residence about nine o'clock. Day sent the uniformed officer, a young man whose name was Klutcher, around to watch the rear of the house, off to the opposite side from the window where Grindle and Davis would enter. Then he left the car parked down the road, walked back, and settled himself in the shadows across from the closed gate to the Kray driveway.

From where he sat he could see the big house clearly. The only light was from the ornamental gaslight in front and from some lights left on in some upstairs rooms; no doubt to discourage prowlers. Day shook his head. When would people learn they weren't fooling anybody, that all they were accomplishing by leaving an inside lamp on was giving the burglars light by which to work. It was the outside lighting that did the discouraging.

Day checked the luminous dial of his watch: almost ten. He sat patiently and waited while the next hour passed, and then it was time for things to start happening.

Almost at eleven sharp Day's ears barely caught the faint rumble of an automobile engine. Headlights shone, then died down the street in the direction of the grove of trees where the car was to be concealed. Day

felt the tension start in his stomach and spread throughout his body, and he tried to swallow the brassy taste in his mouth.

He waited a few minutes, then moved down toward the side of the house where he knew they'd be making their exit. For a fleeting moment he wondered if Officer Klutcher was still faithfully watching the rear side of the house. Then he reassured himself with the thought that Klutcher was the type of young policeman who followed orders to the letter, and Day had instructed him not to leave his post until he was called or heard shots.

Day crossed the dark road and stood near where the iron fence gave way to a low, ivy-colored wall, barely three feet high. He found that his throat was very dry now, so that when he swallowed it made a loud noise, and he absently reached inside his suit coat and touched the butt of his holstered Police Special.

Then he saw the movement near the side of the house, just a glimpse, brief but unmistakable, of a lithe, dark silhouette. Day vaulted the low wall and saw a second man emerge from the side window. The two men were moving side by side now, in a low, fast walk across the spacious, tree-dotted grounds toward where they'd left their car. Day followed them, broke into a jog, and drew his revolver. "Halt!"

Both figures stopped, straightened in surprise, and turned toward him. "Stay where you are!"

As Day yelled, the figure on the left spun abruptly and began to run, clutching what looked like a small suitcase tight against his chest.

Day fired his warning shot, high into the air. The figure continued to run.

"Halt!" Day shouted again. For an uncomfortable second he had the vague desire to aim the second shot at Grindle's bent back. It would be a difficult shot, but possible. Then he elevated the barrel slightly and squeezed two shots into the air.

Grindle didn't even glance around. He disappeared into the darkness, and a moment later the roar of a car engine and the screech of tires sounded from the road beyond the small grove of trees. Day saw the flickering glare of headlights as the car accelerated past the tall iron fence.

Day had stopped near the burglar who'd chosen to stay, still holding the revolver steady to cover the man. In the brightening moonlight he could make out the bitter and disgusted look on the often-photographed features of Ned Davis.

"What happened, Sergeant Day? One of 'em get away?"

Klutzer was breathing hard as he ran up to where Day was holding the gun on Davis.

"Yeah," Day said, "there was one more. I fired at him but missed."

"I saw the vehicle," Klutzer said. "It headed south. Want me to run to the car and call in?"

"Right. Did you get a description?"

"No, sir, just saw the headlights."

"Call for the wagon too," Day said as he handcuffed Davis and prodded him to walk in the direction Klutzer had run, toward the unmarked grey sedan up the road.

During the next six months Day apprehended three more burglars in like fashion—and Grindle's tips helped the sergeant break several other "tough and well-publicized cases."

To prevent his superiors on the force from picking up a pattern in his exploits, Day varied his reports on his cases, once reporting he saw only the burglar he apprehended and suggesting the victim was turning in a false insurance claim; another time stating he'd seen three burglars (the "good citizen" victim in that burglary unknowingly cooperated by reporting as stolen more valuable bronze statuettes than one man could possibly have carried); and claiming in another burglary that he'd wounded the escaped burglar. In that case Grindle feigned a long recuperative period for the benefit of his cohorts in crime. Also, two of the burglars Grindle arranged for Day to capture were wanted on more serious charges in other states and extradited to serve long terms in distant penitentiaries where they couldn't, even by remote chance, compare notes on their respective downfalls.

Apparently, whatever precautions Grindle took to guard his "reputation" worked, for soon the nickname "Lucky Bill Grindle" was added to his list of aliases.

Then there were no more setup jobs, and Grindle contacted Day only once every few months to feed him helpful information. However, now the impetus was there. Day's superiors seemed to regard him more and more highly. Opportunity was his, and he had the skill and guts to make the most of it. Within three years he was cited for bravery and efficiency twice and promoted to sergeant first class, which meant that he was in charge of two teams of detectives.

Audrey was happier now. Sergeant first class pay was better than a

sergeant's, and if a sergeant first class still worked irregular hours, at least they were more predictable hours, and a measure less dangerous.

Day saw his wife's enthusiasm for life reborn, saw his marriage turn from something deteriorating to something growing. Only from time to time, on the edge of sleep or wakefulness, did he think of Bill Grindle, whom he hadn't seen in several years.

Day dedicated himself completely to his job, working harder and more diligently on each case, with each passing year, almost as if he were unconsciously trying to prove something.

His tireless work and dedication paid off. In early June there was a shake-up in the department. Men were demoted and promoted, assignments were shifted. Lieutenant Weston was made a full-fledged captain, in charge of the Mobile Reserve Squad, and Day was promoted to lieutenant to take his place in charge of the West Sector burglary detail. Day, Lieutenant Day, wasn't surprised.

He was surprised, though, six months later, when Bill Grindle called and wanted to see him. Distasteful as it was, Day agreed, and was instructed to be in the public library the next day at three o'clock.

At two the next afternoon Day got busy with some paper work, trying not to think about the impending meeting with Grindle. Using the knack he'd somehow acquired, he managed to lose himself completely in his tedious work.

Then the time arrived, and Day rose from his desk and left his office, nodding to the white-haired desk sergeant as he left the precinct house.

Day sat for what seemed a long time in the criminology section of the library before he sensed a presence and looked up from the open, unread book before him to see the man he'd never wanted to see again.

The same vaguely sarcastic smile, the same amused eyes—the same in every way, only slightly older and heavier—Bill Grindle stood looking down at Lieutenant Day.

"Been a long time," Grindle said, seating himself in a chair across the table.

Day nodded. "Almost five years." He wondered what Grindle had on his mind, but he tried not to let that show.

"You look worried," Grindle said with a smile. "There's no need to worry."

"Why don't you tell me what you want," Day said, "then let me decide whether or not to worry."

Grindle snorted a little laugh and nodded. "No need to try to fool each other, Lieutenant, not old friends like us. I came here about the Bain Corporation warehouse on Palmer Road."

"Bain . . . They're drug manufacturers, aren't they?"

Grindle nodded. "And there's close to eighty thousand dollars' worth of amphetamines stored in their warehouse."

Now Day remembered the plant and warehouse. It had been robbed about three years ago. A low, spread-out, pale-brick building, it was completely isolated in an area that was just beginning to be developed. Since the robbery three years ago, they had installed bright outside lights and hired a night watchman.

"Why meet here and tell me about the Bain warehouse?" Day asked, but he knew why.

"We're partners again," Grindle said, smiling. "You're going to assist me in stealing those amphetamines."

Day shook his head and said simply, "No."

"Come on, Lieutenant Day, you don't want me to tell the police board some things I know, do you? I have some very interesting old tapes. Then too, there's my wife's testimony."

"You'd be cutting your own throat."

"But it would be far from fatal, Lieutenant. It's a point of law that the statute of limitations for breaking and entering in this state is five years. Of course, you couldn't be tried for those early jobs of ours either—wouldn't be convicted on my evidence anyway. But on the other hand there's your career to think about, your family and reputation." Grindle's amused eyes were fixed on him like jewels in some sardonic mask.

Day rose from his chair in anger, but the eyes didn't blink, the mask didn't change.

"I told you before, Lieutenant Day, burglary's like a business with me. You were sort of my pension plan, and now it's time for me to make one big killing and retire."

Day sat back down slowly. The facts had arranged themselves in lightning order in his detective's logical mind, and he knew he was had. "How do I know you'll retire?" he asked Grindle.

Grindle shrugged. "At least you know you won't have to worry about me for another five years. You'll be a captain by that time."

"What about the men you set up? What will they do to you if they find out the truth?"

Grindle smiled and waved a hand. "They're either dead, in prison, or too small for me to worry about now."

Day sighed a long, deflating sigh, knowing that Grindle was right as usual. "What's your plan?"

Grindle glanced around him, amused by the idea of planning a burglary in the library's criminology section.

"Safe and simple," he said. On the back of an envelope he expertly sketched a detailed drawing of the Bain warehouse, then drew in a basic floor plan. "We bypass the alarm here, then we go in through this loading door at five A.M."

"We?"

"Myself and Rich Costa," Grindle said.

Day nodded. Rich Costa was one of the area's well-known burglars, one of the most careful. He was stepping into something not very nice this time.

With the point of the pencil, Grindle showed Day where the amphetamines were stored. There were so many of them that after they'd hauled them across the warehouse to the loading door, Costa was going to go out again and back the car into the dock so they could hurriedly toss the drugs down into the spacious trunk.

"What about the watchman?" Day asked.

Grindle looked up at him a bit surprised. "We take care of him, don't worry."

"How?"

"We wear stocking masks so he can't identify us. He'll be here, in this little office." Grindle drew an X on his floor plan. "We hold a gun on him, bind and gag him. He's an old man and can't give us much trouble."

"And for guaranteeing your safety I suppose I'm to get Costa."

"When we're getting into the car to drive away, you shoot him."

Day looked up sharply, feeling something draw taut in his stomach. "Shoot him?"

Grindle nodded; speaking through his sarcastic half-grin. "This is a big job, my last, and I don't want to have to worry about somebody putting the finger on me for a better deal in court or for a parole later on."

"Do you know what you're doing?" Day asked in an incredulous voice. "You're asking a police lieutenant to commit murder!"

"I'm asking you to shoot a fleeing criminal. You'll probably get a citation. Some of the amphetamine is in powder form in plastic bags. I'll

leave a five-pound bag next to the body to make everything look genuine. You put a couple of bullets in the trunk too, for them to see when they find the car. It won't hurt the narcotics. Just make sure you don't hit a tire or the gas tank."

Day got up and began to walk. He had to walk, had to work some of the nervousness out of his body. "This is crazy!"

Grindle shook his head, glancing about to make sure they were still alone before speaking in a raised whisper. "It's not crazy and it will work, and we're going to do it."

"I'm not a killer!"

"I know you're not, Lieutenant, you're a police officer doing his duty. And you might look at it this way: there is no statute of limitations on murder. I'll be absolutely sure of your discretion, and you'll be free of me."

That was true enough, Day reasoned with some relief, and he felt soiled that the idea of murder for personal gain should actually appeal to him. Day went back to the table and sat down. As he rested his bare, perspiring forearm on the tabletop the faint odor rose to his nostrils. Sweat and varnish, the same as the smell of a police station; sweat and varnish, and sometimes fear.

"Is there a patrol car cruising that area around five A.M.?" Grindle asked.

"I don't know," Day answered slowly. "I can find out."

"Do that," Grindle said, "then phone me and let me know where we can create a diversion to get the car out of the area before we go in."

Day nodded. It was as if the years hadn't passed and he and Grindle were plotting their earlier burglaries. Grindle scribbled a phone number on a torn-off corner of the envelope and handed it to Day.

"It'll be Friday morning unless you hear different," Grindle said.

Day didn't look at him as Grindle pushed back his chair with a scraping sound and left through a side door.

Thursday evening Day went to bed at ten o'clock, telling Audrey that he didn't feel well. He was telling her the truth. All that night after supper he couldn't stop thinking about what he was hiding from her, and for the first time he began wondering if *she* would think the price of her contentment were worth it. It occurred to Day that up until that time he'd only considered the deals he'd made with Grindle from a basically selfish point of view.

He didn't sleep much that night, tossing on the soft mattress and glancing from time to time at the glowing hands of the clock radio. The only thing that comforted him somewhat was that Grindle was right about the murder charge. It would free Day forever from him.

At four-fifteen, as he knew it would, the telephone rang. Day snatched up the receiver instantly, cutting off the first ring, but he sensed that Audrey was awake beside him anyway.

"*This is you-know-who,*" the voice said loosely; "*and I'll meet you you-know-where.*"

"All right," Day said too casually.

"Remember," the voice said, "*last time.*"

"I'll remember," Day said, and hung up the phone.

He was worried. Grindle had sounded as if he were high on something. There had been an electric undercurrent of excitement in the burglar's voice that Day hadn't heard before. As he climbed out of bed and flicked on the soft reading lamp he told himself not to worry. If nothing else, Grindle was a pro.

"What is it?" Audrey asked behind him. "Where are you going?"

"Some work to do," Day said, turning and smiling down at her. She was still sleepy and her face looked peaceful in the soft yellow light. "Duty to perform," he added.

"Again?" she said with drowsy irritation. Summoning phone calls in the middle of the night for Day were nothing new, but they never failed to annoy Audrey.

"You go to sleep and I'll be back in the morning," Day said gently, bending and kissing her forehead.

He went into the bathroom and got dressed quickly, mercilessly splashing ice-cold tap water over his face.

The low, rambling Bain Corporation warehouse was like an island of light in the dark night. The beige brick looked almost white and very clean in the harsh glare from the overhead dusk to dawn lights and the beams of the ground-level spots. Day parked his car off Palmer Road and walked back toward the light, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. To his right the skeletal beams of a half-finished building rose against the starless sky. He was approaching the warehouse from behind and to one side, and when he saw the lighted receiving dock, with its few trailers backed into some of the overhead doors, he grew more cautious.

Day saw that one of the trailers had been backed into a door next to the one Grindle and Costa would use. That would shield them almost completely from the street, and only darkness stretched in the other direction, dotted in the distance by some tiny pinpoints of light.

It was quarter to five. They wouldn't be here for fifteen minutes, and probably just about now were calling in and reporting a prowler at the electric company plant two miles away. Day worked his way closer, concealing himself in a deep shadow near a portable trash container right next to the side of the building. The trash had a sweet, nauseating odor, and Day didn't want to have to stay there long.

Grindle and Costa walked silently past, within thirty feet of Day, but they didn't see him. Day stayed in the deep shadows and drew his revolver from his holster.

He heard a slight metallic clanking and then the low rolling sound of the overhead loading door going up. He got between the building and the trash container, worked himself to the corner, and peered around, but there was nothing to be seen. Grindle and Costa had silently lowered the door behind them so their way of access couldn't be spotted from the outside. They'd also extinguished the outside lights near that door for added concealment.

Day waited, watching.

When Costa left to get the car he would work in behind a nearby parked trailer where he could get off a clear shot.

As he waited, the brassy taste of excitement rose in Day's throat. Nervousness, he decided, as he inched forward. He took a deep breath, then smiled confidently to himself, and that's when he realized the guilt, the shame. For the first time he admitted it to himself. He was enjoying this. He was actually enjoying himself!

The shot from inside the building wasn't very loud, like the single, flat blow of a hammer.

Day straightened and caught the sweet stench of the trash. "No . . ." he whispered to himself. "No!" Then he was running, away from the loading area and toward the front of the building. Within a minute he'd broken the thick glass of a front door with the butt of his revolver and was inside.

He ran through the offices, through a door into the warehouse area.

Everything was dark except for a feeble glow about a hundred feet off to the left. Day remembered the sketch Grindle had made of the

building's floor plan and cautiously made his way toward the light. As he got closer he could hear a radio playing, tuned to some all-night-chatter and soft-music station.

Grindle and Costa had decided to eliminate every possible risk. The old watchman was lying on his stomach in a puddle of blood in the center of the tiny office's floor. His leather holster was empty, and his cap was half-on, half-off his head to reveal a slow trickle of blood through matted grey hair.

With a shaking hand Day picked up the telephone on the desk and dialed Headquarters. He asked to be put through to the Eighth Precinct and heard desk sergeant Hap Kramer's pleasant voice.

"This is Lieutenant Day, Hap. The Bain warehouse on Palmer Road is being hit right now. Get somebody over here."

"Yes, sir."

"There are two men in on it, Bill Grindle and Rich Costa. When they leave they'll be heading east on Palmer in a stolen car with a trunkload of amphetamines. Set up roadblocks around the area."

"Narcotics in trunk, heading east . . . How do you know east, sir?"

"Because I helped them set up the job."

"Yes . . . You *what*?"

"I'll try to stop them here. They've already killed the watchman, and they'll try to kill anybody who gets in their way. Put out an 'armed and dangerous' on them. Now get busy!"

"Yes, sir . . ." The sergeant's voice was unsteady, puzzled.

Day hung up the telephone with a quick, silent motion and stared down once again at the old watchman.

Then cursing, near sobbing, Day ran from the office into the darkened warehouse. Staying low, he felt his way silently toward the other end of the building, toward the loading dock.

They were working by moonlight. Grindle and Costa were just about to close the overhead door and leap from the dock when they turned and saw Day. "Hold it where you are!" Day shouted, leveling his revolver at them. "Both of you, Grindle!"

Grindle screamed something Day didn't understand, then the slug struck Day in the right side, slapping him to the cement floor. He shook his head and saw that only the grey nighttime sky was visible through the open loading door. Both men had dropped from the dock. Day struggled awkwardly to his feet, fell, dragged himself to the doorway.

They'd closed the trunk. Costa was already inside the car, on the passenger's side, and Grindle was just opening the door to get behind the wheel. Day aimed carefully and squeezed off two shots. Grindle fell without a sound, into the limp posture of a dead man.

Day saw Costa scooting frantically across the seat to get behind the wheel of the idling car and tried to aim the revolver again, but the gun was too heavy. The barrel wavered and dropped, and a reddish darkness enveloped Day as the car sped away and turned east. In the instant before his death Day saw that the left rear wheel had passed over the gun in Grindle's lifeless hand.

"It doesn't make sense," Captain Harold Weston said, looking down at Day's body.

The detective standing next to him nodded in agreement.

Captain Weston continued to look down at Day, a puzzled concern in his dark eyes. "He was a good, honest cop, one of the best, and with a future in the department. Then, bang, he goes bad all of a sudden!" Captain Weston shook his head slowly, like a man who has bet and lost. "I just don't understand it . . ."

"Probably nobody could explain it to you but Lieutenant Day," the detective said.

"Probably not," the captain agreed. "But what I can't understand is how he went bad in so short a time. All these years, not a black mark on his record . . . then all of a sudden this. They fool you sometimes, I guess . . . and fool themselves."



The Lipstick Explosion

by James Holding

It has been said that a drowning person, in the brief moments between his last desperate struggles to stay afloat and his death by liquid suffocation, sees passing before his eyes, like a speeded-up motion picture, the chief events and crises of his life.

To Gaston Beaujolais, sitting in his favorite armchair in the flagstoned parlor of Henriette's house, with Henriette herself on his knee, a similar phenomenon occurred one wet spring night in the mountain village of St. Paul de Vence.

There was, however, one important difference: Gaston was in no danger of drowning—unless it was in the deep hazel pools of Henriette's eyes. He was, in fact, demonstrating his affection for Henriette when the first scene of his personal cinéma flashed without warning onto the screen of his consciousness.

Curiously, this flash-back, the lightning-fast recapitulation of his past, did not begin with his childhood or early youth as such manifestations are commonly expected to do. Instead, Gaston's mental movie began only after he had attained mature manhood, married Yvonne, and become preëminent in his profession . . .

Gaston Beaujolais was a chemist. Not the kind of chemist, he was fond of saying, that messes about with nauseous batches of umbelliferone, phthalic anhydride or paradichlorobenzene. Oh, no. He had put his undoubted chemical talents to far better use, placing them at the service of Art and Beauty (with capital letters). He devoted his working hours entirely to the compounding of perfumes, face powders, soothing salves, wrinkle removers, astringents, cleansing unguents and sensuous shades of lipstick and nail polish. Anything, in short, that could conceivably help the French female to look and smell more attractive was grist to Beaujolais' chemical mill. He was, in his words, a cosmetic chemist. And a good one,

too. Indeed, he occupied the post of Chief Chemist at Rousseau Frères, the well-known firm of cosmetic manufacturers whose laboratories were located on the Boulevard Gambetta in Nice, just off the Promenade des Anglais.

It was a mental picture of that laboratory of his that occurred to him first, in that run-through of his past.

He saw himself, quite clearly, standing in his laboratory, a man of middle height with sensitive hands and a purely Gallic ebullience. He was dressed in his white working smock and was watching intently a concoction of some sort that simmered in a test tube over a burner.

He knew, instantly, exactly what the concoction was. It was the new lipstick ingredient he had discovered how to synthesize only that day. It had given him a great deal of trouble, the development of this particular ingredient. For it was not a substance usually included in lipsticks. Yet it was an ingredient that Beaujolais felt sure would inevitably enable Rousseau Frères to corner the world lipstick market, if he should ever divulge its secret to his superiors.

He had not the slightest intention of doing so, however. It was his exclusive formula, privately arrived at and now destined for use in one lipstick only: the lipstick with which he intended to murder his wife.

And the truly Gallic touch that distinguished Gaston's planning was this: he could contemplate with equanimity the murder of his wife, and incidentally, of his best friend as well, but he felt very strongly, indeed that when Yvonne died, he couldn't bear it if she didn't die quickly and happily. She had not, for some years now, of course, been a wife in the true sense of the word. Beautiful, yes, and gracious, *convenable*, affectionate she still was—but in matters of love, what had started as an attractive timidity on her part during their honeymoon had since become what he could only term outright indifference to him. This, Gaston Beaujolais felt, was certainly unsuitable, nay unacceptable, in the wife of an eminent cosmetic chemist.

His first attempt to solve his problem had taken the form of Henriette Deschamps, a lovely mannequin he had met at a fashion show in Cannes, where he had been present as a representative of Rousseau Frères' Commercial Make-up Service. Henriette was lonely, being only recently transplanted from Paris to the Côte d'Azur; she was basically fond of men; she found Gaston appealing in a chemical way. And she had no objections when he found a charming cottage for her in St. Paul de Vence, a village

in the hills with the geographical advantage of being readily accessible to him when he motored from Nice to Grasse and back on his regular visits to secure certain flower fragrances for his work.

Henriette was a joy—a gay, intelligent girl who very soon supplanted Gaston's wife, Yvonne, in his affection. This was made all the easier by Yvonne's obvious and growing distaste for any expression of Gaston's feelings. Even a hurried kiss from him upon his return from the laboratory made her wince a little, uncontrollably. Gaston, who was blessed with a normally healthy ego, realized that Yvonne's was not a revulsion reserved only for him, but encompassed all men alike. Even Alfred, his long time friend, who had also courted Yvonne and bowed gracefully to defeat when Gaston came off with the prize, could nowadays scarcely touch Yvonne's hand to pass her into a taxi, without the same shrinking becoming painfully apparent in her.

The more Gaston found himself in love with his mannequin, Henriette, the more impatient he felt with his wife, Yvonne, and the more pity he felt for his good friend, Alfred.

But since Henriette skillfully soothed the troubled waters of his spirit, and satisfied his persistent need for sympathetic female understanding, he gave the matter of his wife very little thought for a time, living in a dream world of his own in which he found myriad excuses to visit Grasse on business for Rousseau Frères, and stop each time for a blissful interlude with Henriette in St. Paul de Vence.

Such a make-shift arrangement could not possibly last, of course. Henriette soon began to fancy herself a little. As a result, she began to put on a few charming airs. Next, she found herself wishing she were Madame Gaston Beaujolais, rather than merely Gaston's little "mountain blossom" as he called her fondly, carefully concealed from society and shut off from city gaiety as surely as though she were one of the pretty but useless white doves that gathered to gossip on the roof of Lés Colombes, the local inn nearby. This, she said vehemently to Gaston one afternoon, while hugging his handsome head to her bosom, was no way for a girl to live, do you know it, *mon cher*?

Gaston was forced to agree, upon thinking it over, that she had reason on her side. He could not blame a sensitive girl like Henriette for feeling as she did. For several months after she mentioned it to him, his manner both at his laboratory and at home was rather *distract*.

It was during this period of restless brooding that Gaston came to his

decision: Yvonne must be got rid of to make room for Henriette. It was as simple as that. Once this decision was made, he was not unduly troubled by the prospect of having to make away with his wife. It was the *method* of murder that kept him awake at night, tossing fretfully.

He would kill her, he thought feverishly. Yes, it must be. There was no other practical solution. But how? She was not to blame for her shortcomings, poor Yvonne. She was probably as bitterly unhappy in their marriage as he was. He must kill her, he thought, yes, but he must kill her in some way that would give her pleasure. She must be happy at the last. This was a sentiment that did him credit, but it posed a problem, all the same: what method of murder would be pleasant for Yvonne as well as quick and sure for him?

The "quick and sure" requirements occasioned him no difficulty. After all, was he not a brilliant cosmetic chemist, thoroughly accustomed to the compounding of all kinds of beauty aids, including lipsticks? Yes, he decided, a lipstick would be a fitting weapon. To a man of his knowledge and experience, it was the work of but a few minutes to blend a lethal solution of potassium cyanide with the pulp of one of Rousseau Frères' Petal Pink lipsticks that Yvonne always used.

After this simple preliminary step, there followed some weeks of serious research, the net result of which was the new lipstick ingredient that Gaston now stood watching as it bubbled merrily over the Bunsen burner on his laboratory table.

Unfortunately, his brilliant solution of his problem made it imperative that Alfred, his oldest friend and Yvonne's still faithful though frustrated admirer, should die, too. But again, Gaston's conscience proved comfortably elastic, and although he regretted the necessity of finishing off poor Alfred, he was able to console himself by reflecting that Alfred, when the moment of death came, would be happy, too—happier than he had been for years.

Gaston determined to act that very night. Hastily he cooled the bubbling solution in his test tube, combined it skillfully with the body of the lipstick already liberally spiked with hydrocyanic acid, poured four precise drops of a colorless fluid he took from his laboratory shelf into the mixture, added a trifle more scent to the lipstick than was usual (to conceal the odor of almonds), then carefully rolled the finished preparation into lipstick shape, rounded it at one end as though it had been slightly used, and inserted the whole into a black and gold lipstick holder that was the

exact duplicate of the Rousseau Frères 80-franc holder that Yvonne regularly used. The holder he put into his pocket.

They heard a performance of *Simon Boccanegra* at the Casino Méditerranée that evening, the three of them, Alfred, Gaston, and Yvonne. Their seats were together, Yvonne sitting between the two men. It was a La Scala company from Milan, very good, and they enjoyed the opera immensely. Halfway through the last act, Gaston had the opportunity to remove from Yvonne's evening purse, without her knowledge, her black enameled lipstick holder and replace it with the one he had prepared at the laboratory. A few minutes later, as the curtain came down to thunderous applause, he struck himself on the forehead with his clenched fist and said to Yvonne: "What a fool I am, darling! I told you that I must drive up to Grasse tonight, to be there for the early flower market tomorrow." She nodded as she slipped into her wrap. "But," Gaston continued easily, "I have forgotten some important papers that I must have with me. They are at the laboratory. I'll just run down and get them now, do you mind? It will save me time in the end."

"Alors," said Yvonne with a transparent lack of interest, "I'll come with you. Then you can take me home and be on the road for Grasse by midnight."

As though suddenly struck by the possibility, Gaston said, "Unless Alfred would take you home while I go to the laboratory?"

Alfred rose gallantly to the occasion, as Gaston knew he would. "I insist on it, dear fellow," he said warmly. "I'll drive her home with pleasure. If you agree, Yvonne?"

"Why not?" she said indifferently. She took out her compact, unsheathed the pink cylinder of her lipstick and applied it to her lips as they made ready to leave the auditorium.

Gaston's own lips curled in a slight smile.

Outside, it had begun to rain very heavily. They ran to the parking lot, and Alfred hustled Yvonne into the front seat of his Renault, then went around and climbed under the wheel. Gaston waved them away, and went to his own car farther down the rank. He got in and sat listening to the raindrops beating on the canvas over his head, the while he peered through a window at Alfred's Renault. When the car left the lot, he could clearly see the silhouettes of Alfred and Yvonne limned against the lights of the Casino. The silhouettes were surprisingly close together.

Gaston did not go to his laboratory. Instead, he drove carefully from

the parking lot and, at a discreet distance, followed Alfred's Renault. It turned north, up the Avenue de la Victoire toward the suburb where Gaston and Yvonne lived, but he was amused to note that at the next turning, Alfred continued straight on toward the rising hills behind the city. "Ah," Gaston said to himself with quiet satisfaction, "already it marches."

When, presently, the Renault turned off the main road into a dark tree-lined track, Gaston winked and watched the streamers of rain that his headlights disclosed lancing thickly downward. Shutting off his lights, he then pulled up calmly at the edge of the road, several hundred yards short of the dark lane into which Alfred and Yvonne had disappeared.

He lit a Gauloise and sat in his car for five minutes, savoring the strong, black, biting tobacco, then confidently descended into the rain and walked openly up the road to the track where he had last seen the Renault.

He turned into the track, making no effort to conceal his presence. He was sure no one would see him in this deserted locality on such a miserable night. The rain was a stroke of luck, he thought. Certainly Yvonne and Alfred would not see him! He began to breathe a trifle rapidly. That was the only sign of tension about him.

No car lights were visible in the gloomy tunnel before him. But he detected the looming bulk of the darkened Renault twenty yards away, parked under the dripping trees. He approached it deliberately, his feet making small sucking sounds in the wet earth he trod.

And although he knew what he would find when he opened the Renault's door and the dome light came on, he felt a pleasant sense of accomplishment at what he saw there in the front seat.

Yvonne and Alfred were in each other's arms. Each face wore a look of joy and long-deferred satisfaction. Their half-opened lips were pressed together in a magnificently earthy kiss that roused a faint glow of envy in Gaston's romantic breast.

And both were quite dead.

For a long moment, Gaston stood there, his head inside the Renault. His expression was that of an artist who stands back to regard a finished painting, proud and a trifle awed by the masterpiece he has wrought. For Gaston's lipstick was indeed a minor masterpiece. Before him was the proof.

He could hear his own voice, very faint and off-stage, explaining to the wondering assistant chemists at Rousseau Frères exactly what a triumph

of cosmetic chemistry that lipstick of his was. "You will remember," he fancied himself saying, "that Madame Beaujolais was a woman to whom any physical contact with a member of the opposite sex was unpleasant. Yet what happens when she is driven home from the opera by her husband's oldest friend? She moves closer to him in the car almost immediately. She begs him not to drive her directly home, but to take her to some dark spot where, like the veriest teen-age lovers, they can park their car, turn out the lights, and engage undisturbed in what our American allies at one time called 'necking'. Yes, my friends, and when they found them, both dead as doornails, what was their position? They were locked in close embrace; their lips were joined in a passionate kiss.

"How can this be explained—this seemingly inexplicable tableau of death? I shall tell you. It was my lipstick that brought it all about; not only the death of the lovers—that alone would have been easy. But my lipstick was so formulated that it brought death in its fairest guise—a kiss!

"The death-dealing agent? Hydrocyanic acid. But, in all modesty, I must point out to you that it was my original variations on this ancient theme that are of interest. Let us take them in order. First, I desired to make a usually dispassionate woman want to be kissed. The answer, obviously, was a completely new kind of chemical—one that would work by osmosis through the skin of the lips and enter the blood stream in the mouth area with authority enough to arouse in the woman an intense desire, nay, a need to be kissed. Such a chemical I at length compounded, using the rendered salts of a number of other stimulating chemicals as the basic building block of my formula.

"Very well. We now have a lipstick that is lethal and contains a chemical to stimulate the kissing urge. But our difficulties are by no means at an end. Oh, no! Now we must discover some subtle means of holding the instantaneous virulence of hydrocyanic acid at bay, of making it remain quiescent and harmless until the moment of kissing. We don't want the woman to die the moment she applies her lipstick, else the kissing chemical were purposeless.

"Such a substance; too, I was successful in finding. It is a colorless liquid whose source I shall not reveal to you as you might not believe me. Only a few drops serve our purpose. But this antidote to the poison, major discovery though it is, must be a temporary inhibitor only, as you can readily appreciate. Now we must have a catalyst, a trigger, if you will, to remove the restraints set upon the poison by the inhibitor, to

reactivate, at the moment of kissing, the deadly acid that lurks in the lipstick on the lady's lips.

"I see you have guessed the catalyst, my friends. And of course, you are right. The natural moisture of the mouth—here was the logical trigger to set off a lipstick explosion. But wait! Do you see the difficulty involved there?

"The almost insurmountable chemical problem posed by that simple requirement? The trigger cannot be the lady's own saliva. Decidedly not. Merely licking her lips will then inevitably precipitate death. No, my problem, the most difficult one I faced, was to evolve a temporary antidote for hydrocyanic acid that would volatize and release the killing poison only on contact with the moisture of *niale* lips.

"Over this problem I worked with what I must call genuine dedication for some weeks, only, in the end, to be but partially successful. For my solution necessarily embodied death for the man who was kissing her as well as for the woman herself. However, I have never pretended to perfection. Sometimes we must be satisfied with workable compromises. And after all, by the simple formulation of this lipstick, I did succeed in my major aim, which was removing Madame Beaujolais to make way for Henriette, and doing it in such a way that she was very happy in the end!"

Gaston realized, of course, that to address such a monologue as this to his laboratory colleagues would be insane. But by delivering it silently to himself, with his head inside a car on a dark track above Nice, he found that he was able to enjoy, vicariously, some of the approbation for his chemical brilliance that would undoubtedly have been his had he been able to reveal the secret of his lipstick to the world.

That thought brought him up sharply. There was still a great deal to be done.

From the pocket of his wet jacket he brought out Yvonne's own harmless lipstick. He put it into her purse, removing at the same time the poisoned lipstick and placing it in his pocket.

He left her purse open on the seat beside her body, and carefully placed near her right hand a tiny vial, empty, that had the letters HCN stamped on it in tiny type.

Then he closed the door of the car.

The roof light snapped off. And the tragic burden of the Renault withdrew once more into decent darkness. He walked boldly back to his own

car, confident that the rain would wash out the marks of his footsteps on the soft ground of the track.

Driving through the hills half an hour later on his way to St. Paul de Vence, he tried to imagine the surprise and shock with which all his acquaintances—and Yvonne's—would react to the news tomorrow when the bodies were found. The only possible explanation would be a suicide pact, carried out by star-crossed lovers who preferred to swallow poison together as they kissed for the last time, rather than continue to dishonor a loving husband and dear friend by a shabby, clandestine love affair. Everybody in Nice knew that Alfred had always been in love with Yvonne. And now they would know that Yvonne must secretly have been in love with Alfred, too.

Gaston Beaujolais smiled to himself, anticipating the efforts of the authorities in Nice to reach him at Grasse tomorrow with the ill tidings of his beloved wife's death.

Henriette received him in her small house just after midnight, delighted that he was stopping even for a couple of hours with her. She exclaimed in distress when she saw his rain-dampened clothing, and scolded him gently about going out in the rain without wearing a waterproof.

She took his wet jacket and shoes into her bedroom to dry them out before the tiny coal fire that was burning there this damp night; she brought him the dressing gown and slippers that he kept at her house for just such occasions as this.

Then, settling him comfortably in his favorite armchair, she smiled bewitchingly at him and dropped into his lap with eager affection. "Darling Gaston," she said to him in a warm voice, "I feel very much like a wife to you, *tu sais*. I believe no wife could hold you in higher esteem than I do, or love you half so much."

She leaned forward to kiss him, but he held her away from him by the shoulders while he said softly:

"Perhaps you *shall* be my wife before long, chérie."

Her eyes lighted up like those of a child who catches her first glimpse of the Carnaval parade. "Vraiment?" she asked joyfully. "You are not joking, Gaston?"

He shook his head, smiling at her tenderly.

She kissed him with even more passionate gusto than usual.

Gaston returned her caress.

That was the exact moment when the curious cinema-like scenes of his life mentioned earlier in this chronicle began to flash with incredible speed before his inward eye.

Suddenly, violently, he wrenched his lips from hers and with agonized intensity whispered; "Where did you get the lipstick you are now wearing, Henriette?"

She attempted to resume their kiss. "In your pocket," she said, "when I hung up your jacket just now. The sample of Petal Pink you brought me. Why? Does it taste funny?" She giggled.

His arms tightened around her as the first dreadful strictures began. "It tastes like death," he said.

But she was no longer listening.

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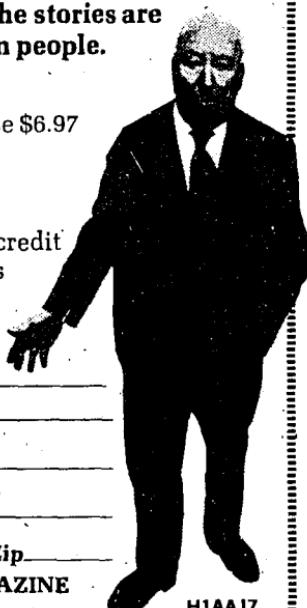
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The Deadly Guest

by Helen Nielsen

Through the soft folds of the Belgian lace curtains, so rotted from age and wear that Selena dared not clear her vision by drawing it back from the glass panel in the door, the man on the front porch didn't appear dangerous at all. He was, in fact, quite an ordinary looking man—fortyish, average height and weight, somewhat awkward and yet presentable enough in a grey worsted suit that was clean, if not new, and a white Panama hat only slightly soiled around the narrow ribbon. One hand had just touched the doorbell; the other held a newspaper folded and exposing the classified section in which appeared a notice of Selena's own composition.

\$40. Room and bath in refined home for cultured gentleman.

Ref. Req. Tel.—

The memorized ad broke off abruptly as the man touched the bell again. Selena glanced behind her with apprehensive eyes. A refined home? The words seemed to mock her. The house was old and run-down; but it had been quite elegant in the days when Winnie was alive to give it charm and color, and when the money from Papa's will went so much farther than it did nowadays. It was because of the money that the ad was in the newspaper. The Shelbys had never opened their home to roomers, and now, with the first one, potentially at least, standing just beyond the door, Selena had a wild notion to race back upstairs and pretend she'd never heard a bell. No matter how harmless he looked, the man on the porch was an invader. Once he entered the house, nothing could ever be quite the same. But what must be, must be. Selena's back straightened. She touched one hand to her hair, light brown with traces of red when the light was complimentary, and put an end to the silly notion by taking a firm grip on the doorknob. There was an instant as the

door swung inward when her own face was reflected in the glass, a good face that reflected her thirty years and yet was reminiscent of girlhood, almost as if girlhood were a precious relic kept in seclusion and taken out on rare occasions.

The occasion was the opening of her door to a stranger. He smiled automatically, and the Shelby breeding remembered what Selena had momentarily forgotten. She responded graciously.

"Mr. Garvin?" she asked.

The man's free hand swept the hat from his head. His hair was a kind of straw color, and above the mark of the hat-band on his forehead the skin was almost white in contrast to the ruddy glow of his face.

"That's right," he said. "I'm Robert Garvin. I guess you must be the lady I talked to about the room, Miss—"

"Shelby," Selena prompted.

"Shelby," he repeated. "Yes, I remember you told me that when you gave me the address. Well, here I am."

The words had a forced brightness. Mr. Garvin's eyes, leaving her face for a moment, made a swift appraisal of his surroundings. The porch was clean—Selena had picked up the daily quota of throwaways immediately after his call—and the wicker furniture, although needing paint, had been wiped down. But the hedges were overgrown, the lawn hadn't been properly mowed since she'd been forced to discontinue the weekly services of the Japanese gardener, and a climbing rose clinging to the overhang of the deep-eaved roof had become a tangled mass weakened by years of uncontrolled prolificity until its blooms were no longer recognizable as blooms of the species. All of these evidences of deterioration; dulled by familiarity, sprang into stinging awareness under the casual glance of a stranger. Selena struggled with the thought of apology; but that was unthinkable. Mr. Garvin wasn't a social caller; he was merely a man who had come to see the room.

"Won't you come inside?" she suggested. "It's really too windy to stand out on the porch."

It wasn't particularly windy, a fact Mr. Garvin remarked upon while passing through the doorway.

"It's nothing like the wind up around Lancaster, where I come from," he said, and then his voice fell silent. Selena, turning about after closing the door, found him standing in the center of the entry hall, his eyes wide and busy like those of a small boy visiting a museum for the first

time. Before him, the massive bannistered stairway mounted up to the second floor hall, its once deep-piled carpet mercifully protected from scrutiny by the shadows of the heavy railing. To the right, almost a continuation of the entry, opened the living room, spacious in area but cluttered with an accumulation of furniture that was no longer stylish and no longer valuable except for the memories it held. For Mr. Garvin it held no memories, only an idle curiosity that led him to wander into the room innocent of presumptuousness.

"You don't see many houses like this around any more," he remarked.

There was no appreciation to his voice. It was a flat statement, and Selena sprang to the defensive.

"No, you don't," she said quickly. "Papa always said—Papa built the house, you see—"

"Your father was a carpenter?"

It was a startling thought, even more so because Mr. Garvin seemed to approve the idea.

"Papa?" Selena echoed. "Oh, no. Papa was in investments. He *had* the house built. It was a wedding present for Mother—that was over fifty years ago. Papa always said this house was built to last, and it was. It's not like those stucco boxes being built nowadays where everybody lives on top of everybody else. I couldn't stand to live that way! I really couldn't!"

If Selena was over-emphatic, it was only because she was still annoyed at this invasion of privacy. Mr. Garvin, who didn't seem as cultured as he'd led her to believe in their telephone conversation, might at least appreciate his surroundings. He moved slowly through the room, touching each relic with blandly curious eyes. At the table near Papa's old leather lounge chair, still creased and indented by a body long departed, he paused to study two photographs in silver frames. Two faces of two men, one aged, strong-jawed and moustached—

"My father," Selena said. "He's been gone nearly fifteen years."

And the other, younger and reminiscent of Selena in a slightly more masculine way.

"My brother, Winfred," she added. "He—he died two years ago."

Mr. Garvin might have expressed regrets, but he didn't. He merely ran a finger along the polished top of the table.

It was dustless. The house was always dustless, particularly the living room.

"It must take a lot of work to keep a place like this clean," he remarked.
"And just the two of you here, you said."

"Yes, just the two," Selena admitted:

"And your mother an invalid."

She'd told him that on the telephone. It was important that they get a quiet, considerate roomer who wouldn't make demands. That's why Selena had decided on a man, over her mother's protests. A man might be a risk; but a woman would be a meddling nuisance—just as Mr. Garvin was now. Extremely annoying.

"If you would like to see the room," she suggested, "it's right upstairs."

Mr. Garvin didn't seem to hear. Now he'd spied a gilt frame hanging on the wall behind the big velour sofa. He leaned forward to study the faded photograph it contained.

"Say, that old boy in the center looks familiar," he said.

"That old boy," Selena replied archly, "is General Robert E. Lee. The officer behind his left shoulder, the one in the plumed hat, is my Great-grandfather Winfield. My mother is a Winfield."

"A Winfield," Mr. Garvin repeated.

The name meant nothing to him. Selena's face studied itself into a frown.

"You told me on the telephone that you're a student at the university. Is that right, Mr. Garvin?"

He didn't appear to be a student of anything—a man of his age and crudity. But at her question he turned around, smiling.

"Not exactly," he answered. "I said I was hoping to be a student, if I can pass my exams and reenter. You see, I started out twelve years ago—right after the war, that was—to be a doctor. A surgeon."

Mr. Garvin held out his hands in front of him. One of them still clutched the newspaper, and the other the hat; but he didn't seem to notice.

"When I was a boy, I lived on a ranch," he said. "I used to be great friends with the family doctor we had in those parts, and I still remember him telling me, 'Robert, you'd make a fine surgeon. You've got a surgeon's hands.'"

For a moment Mr. Garvin's voice and Mr. Garvin's eyes were far back in time, and then Selena watched him return; smile sheepishly, and drop his hands again as he turned to her.

"I suppose that sounds foolish."

"No," Selena heard her voice answering. "It doesn't."

"You don't think so?"

His face was illuminated. He was that small boy in the entry hall again—the small boy from a ranch grown tall and slightly bald.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I'm not sure that it isn't. I'll probably never finish, but it's something I've just got to do. You see, I'm kind of like you—alone. I lost my wife and father-in-law last year—both of them at once in an accident."

"I'm sorry," Selena said.

"Yes, it was hard. I was stunned for awhile, and then I decided to change everything in my life and clear out. I'd been in the hardware business with my father-in-law, so I sold the store and the house, and then I asked myself what I really wanted to do with my life. When you've got nothing to lose, you may as well shoot for the moon. I'd had two years of pre-med before I met Maxine, that was my wife, and fell in love. Her father had a big hardware and farm equipment store in Lancaster and needed somebody to help run it. When a young man's in love, he can be talked into just about anything."

"I suppose so," Selena said. "Would you like to see the room now?"

"Maybe it is a foolish idea, but even if I don't make it, I'll have had a try." Mr. Garvin was talking to himself for a moment, and then he looked up as if hearing her question by delayed transmission. "Oh," he said, "I almost forgot. I've got a letter from the university here in my pocket. You said you wanted a reference."

He had a letter in his pocket, but he had a newspaper and a hat in his hands. He turned about, looking for a place to drop them and then stopped, took two steps forward, and stared up at what had been behind him all the time. It was an old-fashioned fireplace with a wide mantle shelf full of heirlooms and, hanging above it, a large amateurish painting of a young woman—blue eyes, chestnut hair hanging to her shoulders, lips parted in a happy smile.

"Why, it's you!" Mr. Garvin said.

There was no reason to feel embarrassed, and yet Selena did.

"It's an old painting," she protested.

"Old? It can't be so very old. You look the same now. More mature, but the same."

"It's not even a good painting," Selena insisted. "I only keep it there because of sentimental reasons. My brother painted it. Oh, Mr. Garvin! Be careful of the Limoges vase—"

He'd started to put his hat down on the mantle. He stopped and drew back his arm just short of the vase, a yellowish, ornate affair prominently displayed among other assorted curios.

"Limoges?" he repeated.

"It's very old and very valuable." Selena stepped forward to make sure the vase was steady on the shelf. "Grandmother Winfield held it in her hands in the train all the way across country," she said. "All the way from Louisville, Kentucky."

"I wonder what Grandfather Winfield was holding," Mr. Garvin said.

She turned about quickly. He was smiling at her in a strange way.

"Miss Shelby," he said, looking at her and not at the painting, "you have very pretty eyes."

It wasn't until after she'd shown Mr. Garyin up to the room and collected a month's rent in advance that Selena remembered she hadn't seen the letter of reference from the university.

"I don't like your Mr. Garvin," Cora Shelby said. "I don't trust him. He snoops about the house. Yesterday he even came into my room."

She was a drawn woman, tight mouthed, tight faced, dark eyes set in a shadowed network of finely wrinkled skin that gave her the appearance of peering out of a great depth. Her hair, once the shade of Selena's, was now quite grey. Her hands, small and unmarked by the vulgarity of toil, fidgeted with the edge of the knitted Afghan swathing her torso and legs and tucked in neatly under the arms of a wicker-backed invalid's chair.

"You said a man wouldn't snoop. I told you not to take a man into this house, Selena, but you wouldn't listen to your mother. What's he up to? What's he about?"

Her voice was a tiresome drone.

"He's up to fixing the faucet in your bathroom," Selena answered, straightening the pillow that had slipped down below her mother's shoulders. "It doesn't leak any more, does it?"

"You could have called a plumber."

"And paid a big bill. Mr. Garvin didn't charge anything. He said he was only glad to be of service, Mother."

"Why?" Cora Shelby demanded.

It was a pointed question, pointed and barbed. Selena looked at her mother strangely.

"Why—?" she echoed.

"Exactly," Cora said. "You're such a child, Selena, when it comes to the ways of the world. A bigger child than your brother was—and God knows he was fool enough. Look what that woman did to him—"

Cora's voice broke and faded into silence. Selena drew away from the chair. It would be a difficult conversation if it continued. She crossed to the window and looked out. It was a warm day. The window was open, and now, rising up from the yard below, came the unfamiliar sound of a lawn mower being coaxed over a stubborn growth of grass.

"What's that?" her mother demanded. "Who's working in the yard?"

"Mr. Garvin," Selena said.

"Who gave him permission, may I ask?"

Selena turned about. Her face was slightly flushed.

"Permission?" she echoed. "Permission to oil the mower and cut the grass? Permission to paint the porch furniture and cut back that old rose? Permission to take out the trash? Do you realize how much Robert Garvin has done in the two weeks he's been living here? He's doing us a service—we're not doing him one!"

Cora Shelby took the words calmly, the only trace of emotion being the way her eyes seemed to brighten with each one until they held a kind of mystical knowing.

"We may," she said quietly, "at the proper time."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, Selena. I don't know. I just have a feeling about people, you know that. I had a feeling about that girl your brother wanted to marry. I told you she would ruin him."

The conversation would come back to Winnie, always.

"Mother, don't! Don't talk about it!" Selena said.

"And I was right. She was no good. All she wanted was this property. When she learned it wasn't Winnie's, she left him. Sometimes, Selena, I think I hear him in his room again. I know it's only Mr. Garvin, but sometimes I forget. Once I almost called out to him, and then, a few minutes later, even though I hadn't called out, I looked up and saw Mr. Garvin standing in the doorway staring at me."

"Mr. Garvin? Are you sure?"

Cora looked at Selena sharply. "Do you think I would lie to you?"

"Oh, no, Mother—"

"Or that I'm imagining things? No, Selena. I didn't imagine that Winnie shot himself—"

Cora's fingers began to tremble violently at the edge of the afghan. Selena crossed the room and knelt beside the chair.

"Mother—please. You know that you promised never to speak of that again. Winnie is gone."

"Winnie killed himself because of that woman!"

"He's gone," Selena repeated firmly, "and he has nothing at all to do with Mr. Garvin. You're getting yourself worked up over nothing. Mother—"

Cora Selby's lips were trembling, and the color had drained from her face. She tried to speak. Finally her lips managed one word: "Medicine." Selena got up from the floor and went swiftly to the night table beside her mother's bed where the bottle and teaspoon were kept in constant readiness. She poured a dose and returned to the chair. After the administration, the trembling gradually ceased. The old lady leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. For a few seconds she was quiet and then, eyes still closed, she said—

"You're right, Selena. I mustn't talk about Winnie any more. But I don't like your Mr. Garvin staring at me. You must never leave me alone with him in the house. Promise."

"But, Mother, why?"

"Promise, Selena."

"All right, I'll promise. But it's all a lot of foolishness. Mr. Garvin is studying to be a doctor. He probably looked in out of professional curiosity."

"A doctor—?" Cora's eyes opened and fixed on Selena's face. "That man—a doctor?"

"I thought I'd told you," Selena said.

"No, you didn't tell me. He doesn't look like a doctor. He looks like a—a plumber," Cora said. "You remember Dr. Hughes, what a gentleman he was."

"Mr. Garvin is only studying."

"But he's a middle-aged man, Selena!"

It was difficult to explain anything to her mother; that's why Selena seldom made the effort. Since Winnie's death, she'd gradually taken over everything, including making all of the decisions. There was a faint undercurrent of resentment in her voice as she answered.

"It's just something he's always wanted to do. He started when he was younger. After his wife and father-in-law died—".

"Died? How did they die?"

"In an accident."

"Did he inherit property?"

Selena returned the medicine to the night table. She wanted to leave the room then before her mother could work herself up again; but the question had an answer, and the answer pricked at her mind. ". . . and then I sold the store and the house," Mr. Garvin had said.

Selena turned back to her mother.

"I don't think you should talk any more just now," she said.

Cora Shelby's eyes had the knowing in them again.

"You like him, don't you?"

"No! No, I don't!" Selena answered. "I don't like a stranger in my house at all. But he's here and I try to make the best of it."

"Has he made any advances toward you?"

"Certainly not! Why should he?"

"It's your house, Selena. When I'm gone everything will be yours—the house, the furniture, the antiques, but, above all, the heritage. You're a Shelby, Selena. You come of fine stock."

"Mother—please!"

"I expect you to remember that even when I'm gone. Even if something happens to me."

"If anything happens—?"

"I get feelings about people, Selena. You know that. Just don't leave me in the house with him alone."

Selena left the room, flushed and shaken. There was nothing in what her mother had said—intelligence told her that, and yet she started on the stairway when the front door burst open and Robert Garvin came in. At times he was sudden and blunt in his actions, as if violence was lurking deep inside. The door swung back hard; only his outstretched hand, remembering the invalid, caught it short of slamming. Then he looked up. His shirt was open at the throat, his face and neck wet with perspiration. Drops of moisture glistened on his eyebrows. He looked at Selena and smiled.

"Now, there's a painting I'd like to do," he said. "Selena descending the stairs." And then he stopped, noticing the strain in her eyes. "What is it, Miss Shelby? Is something wrong?"

She couldn't just stare at him. *"He doesn't look like a doctor."* No, she couldn't just stare.

"Mother had a slight attack," she said.

"Your mother? I'd better have a look—"

He started toward her on the stairway, but Selena stepped down and laid a restraining hand on his bare arm. "No, you mustn't!" She drew her hand away. The feel of his flesh was warm and alive. Her fingers tingled from it even when they were empty. "Not now," she added, more quietly. "She's resting now."

"Perhaps you should call a doctor."

"No!" Selena moved past him and walked into the living room. Anything to draw him away from the stairs. "Mother hasn't allowed anyone to attend her since Dr. Hughes retired. He was our family physician for thirty years."

"No one attends her? Do you really mean no one?"

"I attend her," Selena said. "Dr. Hughes left a prescription."

"But that doesn't seem fair to you. You deserve a life of your own. Which reminds me; someone gave me a pair of tickets to a play that's on tonight. I hear it's good. How about going with me?"

Selena had reached the fireplace. She glanced up and saw the portrait, and for a moment its eyes held her. She turned about. Mr. Garvin was so close she could have reached out and touched him again.

"I'm sorry," she said, in a tight voice, "that's not possible. I can't leave Mother alone tonight."

"Then you go. Have a change of scenery. I'll stay with your mother. Please go."

It was strange that he should make such an offer only minutes after her mother's premonition. Selena felt a tingling again, a kind of electric awareness of danger. She stepped back against the mantle. It was solid and familiar. It had no subtleties or ulterior motives. She turned her head and saw the Limoges vase. She reached out, not, this time, to steady it, but to be steadied by it. There was strength of communion with the past. When the moment of panic faded, she turned to find Mr. Garvin studying her with penetrating eyes.

And waiting for her to give an answer.

"No, thank you, Mr. Garvin," she said firmly. "I can't leave the house. Mother's condition may be serious."

And Mr. Garvin, who had suddenly become an object of mystery, became even more mysterious when he said—

"I'm sure it is, Miss Shelby."

An invader was in the house. Selena never relaxed her vigil after that day. It wasn't possible to believe the thing her mother sensed in Robert Garvin; but neither was it possible to forget. He'd asked her to go out with him. Was it an innocent gesture of friendship, or groundwork for something sinister? She wanted to know more about the accident in which his wife and father-in-law had died. She thought about it for several days, and even went so far as beginning a letter of inquiry about Robert Garvin to the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce. She tore up the letter. Common sense told her there was no ulterior motive in a roomer being helpful around a run-down house or attentive to an invalid.

But common sense suffered a staggering blow the day Robert Garvin hid the medicine bottle.

It was a week after the lawn-mowing episode. True to her promise, Selena hadn't left her mother alone when the roomer was at home. On weekdays this was simple enough. He left in the morning and didn't return until late afternoon. Shopping and chores could be done when he was away. But on Saturday complications arose. Mr. Garvin was home all day Saturday, usually studying in his room or tidying up the yard. He was clipping a hedge near the front step when Selena went out. There was no way to avoid the trip. She'd forgotten to mail the property tax payment and this was the last day-of grace. She couldn't afford a penalty. He smiled and spoke to her as she left the house. She walked rapidly. Three blocks to the mail box and three blocks back—how long could it take? Of course, there was Mrs. Levering at the corner who had to inquire about her mother, and a moment to step into the drug store for a small purchase. When Selena returned to the house the hedge clippers were on the porch step. Robert Garvin was nowhere in sight.

She went inside. The hall was empty, the house quiet, and then, even as she started up the stairs, the quiet was shattered.

"No! Don't come near me! I don't want that!"

It was her mother's voice, followed by the sharp sound of breaking glass. Selena raced up the stairs and into her mother's room to find her, white-faced and wide-eyed, staring at Robert Garvin with something akin to horror. Robert Garvin, quite unhorribly, was on his knees carefully picking up the remains of the medicine bottle. The largest piece, the bottom, still holding about an inch of liquid, was balanced in one hand. The other hand groped carefully over the carpet.

He looked up and saw Selena.

"She knocked the bottle out of my hand," he said. "It hit the corner of the table."

"Selena—!"

Cora Shelby sobbed the word.

"You left me alone! He came into my room!"

Mr. Garvin stood up, his hands full of broken glass and his eyes troubled.

"She called for you, Miss Shelby. I knew you'd gone out, so I came. I seemed to startle her. I thought she was going to have some kind of attack, so I got the medicine from the table."

"He put something into it!"

"Put something—" Mr. Garvin stared at the old lady in the chair, and then at Selena. "That's ridiculous," he said. "The cap stuck. I went into the bathroom to run hot water over it."

"He put something into it! I warned you, Selena. I get feelings about people, you know I do. I had a terrible feeling about that girl Winnie wanted to marry, and she made him kill himself. I know what Mr. Garvin wants. He wants to get rid of me. I'm in the way. Look at his eyes, Selena!"

Selena did look at his eyes. But what could be told from eyes? The innocent looked guilty under the shame of accusation; the guilty looked innocent from practiced poise. Mr. Garvin merely looked angry.

"I'd better put this glass in the trash can," he said. He moved violently toward the door, paused and turned back for an instant. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Shelby," he said. "I was only trying to help."

He sounded sincere. Selena quieted her mother and went downstairs. She was shaken by the experience, and yet, he had sounded sincere. In any event, he deserved an apology. She looked for him on the porch, but he wasn't there. She went into the kitchen. The kitchen was empty. She went through the service porch and on out into the rear yard, expecting to find him at the trash can. He wasn't there. She stared at the can for several moments and then lifted the lid. There were a few empty tins in the bottom of the can. There was no broken glass.

On the following Saturday, Mr. Garvin and the Limoges vase disappeared.

It had been difficult enough to talk her mother out of calling the police after the incident of the medicine bottle; but the loss of her most valued heirloom was another matter. There was a certain Lieutenant Angelo who

had been so understanding at the time of Winnie's death. Surely he would come to the house. He did. He went first to Mrs. Shelby and heard her version of the medicine bottle, and then he went downstairs and examined the place where the vase had stood, as if, by staring at a ring on the mantle, he might somehow pick up a scent. Selena told him, then, about the disappearance of the bottle.

Lieutenant Angelo had very bushy eyebrows. They met like two matched caterpillars when he frowned.

"You should have reported that, Miss Shelby," he said.

"It seemed such a little thing," she protested.

"Miss Shelby," he asked, "just what do you know of this man?"

When an officer of the law asked the question, staring at her in such a grim manner, the fears she'd been locking behind the excuse of her mother's illness took on a degree of reality. She confessed to having started a letter of inquiry.

"... and then tore it up. My fears seemed so foolish when I tried to put them down on paper."

"They probably are," the lieutenant said. "Just the same, things do happen—"

And something did. The front door opened and Mr. Garvin walked in.

The most noticeable thing about him was the newspaper-wrapped bundle under his arm. The next most noticeable thing was the way he didn't go to the stairs, but, rather, came directly into the living room. He'd almost reached the mantle before he looked up and saw Selena and Lieutenant Angelo. Selena introduced them. There was a moment of near tension, and then Mr. Garvin calmly removed the newspaper from the bundle and placed the Limoges vase back on the mantle.

"I'm sorry, Miss Shelby, if I upset you," he said. "I have a friend who deals in antiques. He wanted to see your vase."

It was too much for Lieutenant Angelo. "Do you ordinarily appropriate personal property in that manner, Mr. Garvin?" he demanded.

Mr. Garvin glanced fleetingly at Selena.

"Why, no," he said. "I just didn't think. Say, are you here because of me?"

"It's customary to report stolen valuables, Mr. Garvin."

"But I didn't steal anything!"

That was true. At the lieutenant's suggestion, Selena examined the vase; but it wasn't a replica.

"What is this?" Mr. Garvin demanded. "What am I suspected of doing?" "What did you do with Mrs. Shelby's broken medicine bottle?" the lieutenant asked.

"The broken bottle—?" Color was rising in Mr. Garvin's face. "So that's it! The old lady's after me again. What's she been telling you, that I tried to poison her?"

"Did you?" the lieutenant asked.

Mr. Garvin seemed stunned for a moment; then he turned to Selena as if looking for reassurance. All he saw was doubt and fear.

"Miss Shelby," he said, "I think you'd be happier if I lived elsewhere."

He didn't wait for any more questions. He turned abruptly and went thundering up the stairs.

Selena saw Mr. Garvin just once more. It was after the lieutenant had gone and she'd had a chance to assure her mother that everything was all right. Mr. Garvin was going. She came out of the room and found him waiting at the head of the stairs. His suitcase was packed and standing on the floor behind him; his Panama hat was in his hand. For a moment he looked exactly the same as he had a month ago, but he wasn't the same. Nothing was—the same or ever would be again. Selena knew that even before he spoke and said what he did.

"I've got to explain something before I go," he said. "I couldn't do it when the policeman was here, but I've got to do it now. Selena—" He used her given name deliberately. "I'm not a thief or a poisoner. Believe me."

"Please, Mr. Garvin—" she began.

"No; don't you turn into a Winfield-Shelby—not now. Your breeding and manners are the finest, I know, but your eyesight is poor. That's understandable, I suppose. Light doesn't find its way into this mausoleum easily."

She wanted to walk away from him. She didn't want any more trouble; it had been difficult enough with her mother.

But she couldn't move. He didn't touch her, and yet he held her rooted there before him.

"You'd be better off in one of those stucco boxes you despise so much," he added, "but you couldn't leave your mother, could you? She might have a faint spell and need her medicine." He thrust one hand into his coat pocket and came up with a crumpled sheet of paper. He pushed the paper into Selena's hand. "The next time she needs a bottle, save the

money and make it yourself. This chemist's report will tell you how. All you need is a little water, sugar, and vegetable coloring—

"What's the matter, Selena? Don't you want to read it? Don't you want to know why your mother knocked the bottle out of my hand—why she doesn't want a doctor to see her? She was afraid I would know enough to recognize what you won't see. She's not an invalid, Selena. She's a diabolical—"

"Mr. Garvin!" Selena gasped. "That's enough!"

It was all she could say. He'd hurled the words at her, and her mind was denying them as fast as they came.

"Enough?" he echoed. "What's the matter, Selena, are you afraid of the truth? Your mother is a diabolical fraud, that's what I started to say." His voice was rising; it would carry down the hall. He saw the warning in her eyes, and shouted all the louder. "Do you hear me, Mrs. Shelby? I don't know why your son killed himself, but I'll bet it was because that was the only way he could get out of the house! Selena—"

She'd started toward her room. There was an earthquake in the hall, and when the world begins to tremble one flees for shelter. He caught her arm and made her listen.

"That's why the medicine bottle wasn't in the trash can," he said. "Not because I was afraid you'd find traces of poison; but because I was certain what a chemist would find. Just as I was certain what an antique dealer would find when I brought him that vase."

Now Selena turned slowly and faced him. Through the earthquake and falling debris, he was astonishingly distinct.

"The Limoges?" she whispered.

"No, Selena. The cheap little ceramic vase that Grandma Winfield held in her hands all the way from Louisville, Kentucky. And do you know why? Because, I think, Grandpa Winfield must have bought it for her at some little country auction and given it to her with all his love, and because of that it was priceless to her as it would have been to any woman. But it's not Limoges, Selena. I knew that the first day I came here. My wife had a crazy thing about antique ceramics. We couldn't afford many, but she dragged me to every auction and bazaar—"

Mr. Garvin's voice faded away as if someone had cut off the sound. His lips continued to move, but he was trembling now, too. It was the earthquake. The terrible earthquake.

"No!" Selena cried. "I don't believe you!"

"Then come with me to the antique dealer."

"No, I won't! I don't believe you, Mr. Garvin! Get out of my house, you're spoiling it! You're making us all worthless!"

"No, Selena—"

"You're making my life worthless, too!"

"Selena—no! It's your life that's valuable—not an old piece of pottery!"

She pulled loose from him. He was lying; he had to be. He'd brought the earthquake, and it was destroying everything that was good and fine—Papa in his old leather chair, Winnie gay and laughing as he painted in the garden, the Limoges—

"All right!" he shouted. "If you want to stay in this house and rot, all right! I was trying to help you escape, but that's not possible. You're the invalid, not your mother!"

He whirled about in that sometimes violent way of his, and it was then that Selena knew what was wrong. In just a fragment of a second, the earthquake stopped and everything came clear. Robert Garvin was leaving her. She screamed.

"Robert—look out!"

He'd forgotten the suitcase, and he was too angry when he whirled about to see it in time. For a moment he seemed to poise in space, like a startled man changing his mind at the edge of a diving board. But he couldn't change his mind; his momentum was too great. He grabbed wildly at the empty air and plunged headlong down the stairs. He never made a sound. When Selena reached him, he lay sprawled at the foot of the stairs with his head bent back at a grotesque angle. She dropped to her knees beside him.

"Robert—" He couldn't answer. "Oh, Robert—" She leaned forward and laid her cheek against his tenderly, but he never knew.

Finally, the last invader was gone. The house was Selena's again, but it would never be the same. It had been trampled by policemen and ambulance attendants; it had been ruined with violence. All of the good memories were gone; all of the happy days. She closed and locked the door, and then walked slowly into the living room. For a long time she stood staring up at the portrait above the mantle.

"Selena—"

Her mother called from upstairs. Selena heard, but she didn't move.

"Selena—my medicine!"

Selena walked to the mantle and took what had once been the Limoges vase in her hands. She held it for a moment. There was strength in the past. Then, with all her strength, she hurled it against the fire-brick.

"Selena—!"

There were other relics on the mantle: the Wedgwood pin box, the crystal inkwell, the porcelain dog—

"Selena, what are you doing?"

By now everything was smashed. Selena turned around and saw her mother at the foot of the stairs. She swayed slightly and then steadied herself against the newel post with one hand. She was standing exactly where Robert Garvin had died.

"Selena, what's the matter with you? You don't believe what that awful Mr. Garvin said, do you? They were lies, you know that. All lies!"

Selena didn't answer.

"You didn't come when I called, Selena, and I needed you. That's not being grateful after what I did for you. The police were suspicious. They thought you pushed Mr. Garvin down the stairs, but I lied for you. I told them I knew you hadn't because I rolled my chair into the hall and saw him fall. But I didn't, Selena. I didn't see anything. For all I know, you did push him—"

Cora Shelby's voice was a drone at the foot of the stairs, a whine, an annoyance—

"For all I know you may really be a murderer, Selena, but I protected you!"

—and a relic. Selena glanced down at the smashed fragments in the fireplace, and when she looked up again, she was smiling. But it wasn't the same smile as the one in the painting.

She moved slowly toward the stairway.

"Yes, you're right," she said. "You do have feelings about people, don't you? For all you know, I may be a murderer . . ."



That Kind of a Day

by Lawrence Block

Traynor got the call at a quarter to nine. The girl on the line was named Linda Haber and she was a secretary—the secretary—at Hofert & Jordan. The boss had been shot, she kept saying. It took Traynor close to five minutes to find out who she was and where she was and to tell her to sit down and stay put. She was still babbling hysterically when he hung up on her and pulled Phil Grey away from a cup of coffee. He said, "Homicide, downtown and west. Let's go."

Hofert & Jordan had two and a half rooms of office space in a squat red-brick building on Woodlawn near Marsh. There was a *No Smoking* sign in the elevator. Grey smoked anyway. Traynor kept his hands in his pockets and waited for the car to get to the fourth floor. The doors opened and a white-faced girl rushed up and asked them if they were the police. Grey said they were. The girl looked grateful.

"Right this way," she said. "Oh, it's so awful!"

They entered an anteroom, with two offices leading from it. One door was marked *David Hofert*, another marked *James Jordan*. They went through the door marked *James Jordan*. Linda Haber was trembling. Grey took her by an arm and eased her toward a chair. Traynor studied the scene.

There was an old oak desk with papers strewn over it; some papers had spilled down onto the floor. There was a gun on the floor a little to the left of the desk, and somewhat farther to that side of the desk there was a man lying face down in a pool of partially dried blood, some of which had spattered onto the papers.

Traynor said, "Mr. Jordan?"

"Mr. Hofert," the Haber girl said. "Is he—" She didn't finish the question. Her face paled and then she fainted.

Some lab people came and took pictures, noted measurements, and made chalk marks. They had Hofert's body out of the building in less

than half an hour. Grey and Traynor worked as a team, crisp and smooth and efficient. Traynor questioned the secretary when she came to, then had the medical examiner give her a sedative and commissioned a patrolman to drive her home. Grey routed the night elevator operator out of bed and asked him some questions. Traynor called the man who did the legal work for Hofert & Jordan. Grey got a prelim report from the M.E., pending autopsy results. Traynor bought two cups of coffee from a machine in the lobby and brought them upstairs. The coffee tasted of cardboard, from the containers.

"Almost too easy," Traynor said. "Too simple."

Grey nodded.

"At 6:45 last night the Haber kid went home. Jordan and Hofert were both here. Jordan stayed until eight. From six at night until eight in the morning nobody can get in or out of the building without signing the register, and the stairs are locked off at the second-floor landing. You have to sign and you have to use the elevator. Jordan signed out at eight. Hofert never signed out; he was dead."

"What was the time of death?"

"That fits too. A rough estimate is twelve to fourteen hours. One bullet was in the chest a little below the heart. It took him a little while to die. Say five minutes, not much more than that. Enough time to lose a lot of blood."

"So if he got shot between seven and eight—"

"That's about it. No robbery motive. He has a full wallet on him. No suicide. He was standing up when he got shot, standing and facing the desk, Jordan's desk. The Haber girl couldn't have killed him. She left better than an hour before Jordan did and the sheet bears her out on that."

"Motive?"

Traynor put his coffee on the desk. "Maybe they hated each other," he said. "A little two-man operation jobbing office supplies. The lawyer says they didn't make much and they didn't lose much either. Partners for six years. Jordan's forty-four, Hofert was two years older. The secretary said they argued a lot."

"Everybody argues."

"They argued more. Especially yesterday, according to the secretary. There's a money motive too. Partnership insurance."

Grey looked puzzled.

"Twin policies paid for out of partnership funds. Each partner is insured, with the face amount payable to the survivor if one of them dies."

"Why?"

"That's what I asked the lawyer. Look, suppose you and I are in business together. Then suppose you die—"

"Thanks."

"—and your wife inherits your share. She can't take a hand in the running of the business. After I pay myself a salary there's not much left in the way of profits for her. What she wants is the cash and what I want is full control of the business. Lots of friction."

"Maybe I'd better live," Grey said.

Traynor ignored him. "The insurance smooths things out. If you die, the insurance company pays me whatever the policy is. Then I have to use the money to buy your share of the business from your widow. She has the cash she needs, and I get the whole business without any cost to me. That way everybody's happy."

"Except me."

"Hofert & Jordan had partnership insurance," Traynor said. "Two policies, each with a face amount of a hundred grand. That's motive and means and opportunity, so pat it's hard to believe. I don't know what we're waiting around here for."

They didn't wait long. Half an hour later they picked up James Jordan at his home on Pattison. They asked him how come he hadn't gone to his office. He said he'd worked late the night before and wasn't feeling too well. They asked him why he had killed his partner. He stared at them and told them he didn't understand what they were talking about. They took him downtown and booked him for murder.

Hofert's widow lived in a ranch house just across the city line. The two kids were in school when Traynor and Grey got there. Mrs. Hofert was worried when she saw them. They told her as gently as you can tell a wife that someone has murdered her husband. A doctor came from down the block to give her a hypo, and an hour later she said she was ready to talk to them. She wasn't, really, but they didn't want to wait. It was a neat case, the kind you wrap up fast.

"That poor, poor man," she said. "He worked so hard. He worked and he worried and he wanted so very much to get ahead. He put his blood into that business. And now he's gone and nothing's left."

Grey started to light a cigarette, then changed his mind. Mrs. Hofert was crying quietly. Nobody said anything for a few minutes.

"I hardly ever saw him," she said. "Isn't that something? I hardly ever got to see him and now he's gone. So much work. And it wasn't for himself, nothing was ever for himself. He wanted money for us. For me, for the boys. As if we needed it. All we ever needed was him and now he's gone—"

Later, calmer, she said, "And he didn't leave us a thing. He was a gambler, Dave was. Oh, not cards or dice—not that kind of a gambler—stocks, the stock market. He made a decent living but that wasn't enough because he wanted more, he wanted a lot of money, and he tried to make it fast. He wanted to take risks in the business, to borrow money and expand. He had dreams. He always complained that Jim wouldn't let him build the business, that Jim was too conservative. So he took chances in the market, and at first he did all right, I think. He told me he did, and then everything fell in for him and . . . Oh, I don't understand anything!"

On the way downtown, Grey said, "Try it this way. Hofert went into Jordan's office last night. They'd been arguing off and on all day. He wanted to draw more money out of the company, or to borrow and expand, or anything. He was in terrible shape financially. The house was mortgaged to the roof. He'd already cashed in his personal insurance policies. He was in trouble, desperate. They argued again. Maybe he even threw a punch. The office was a mess, they could have been fighting a little. Then Jordan took out a gun and shot him. Right?"

"That's the only way it plays."

"Let's talk to Jordan again," Grey said.

They double-teamed Jordan and kept questions looping in at him until he had admitted almost everything. He admitted ownership of the gun, said he had bought it two years ago and had kept it in his desk ever since. He admitted quarreling with Hofert that afternoon and said that Hofert kept provoking arguments. He confirmed the secretary's statement about the time of her departure and the fact that he and Hofert had stayed alone in the office.

He denied killing Hofert.

"Why? Why would I do it?"

"You were fighting with him. Maybe he swung at you—"

"Dave? You're crazy. Why should he hit me?"

"Maybe he hated you. Maybe you hated each other. You shot him, panicked, and left. You couldn't face his corpse in the morning and you stayed home in bed until we came for you."

"But I—"

"You stood to gain complete control of the business with him dead. All the profits instead of half, and no partner to get in your hair."

"Profits!" Jordan was shouting now. "I have enough! I have plenty!" He caught his breath, slowed down. "I'm a bachelor, I live alone, I save my money. Check my bank account. What do I want with blood money?"

"Hofert was dead weight. He was in hock up to his ears and he was giving you a bad time. You didn't plan on killing him, Jordan. You did it on the spur of the moment. He provoked it. And—"

"I did not kill David Hofert!"

"You admit it's your gun."

"Yes, damn it, it is my gun. I never fired it in my life. I never pointed it at anything. It was in my desk, in case I ever needed it—"

"And last night you needed it."

"No."

"Last night—"

"Last night I finished my work and went home," Jordan said. "I went home, I was tired, I had a headache. Dave stayed in the office. I told him I might not be in the next morning. 'Take it easy,' he said. That was the last thing he said to me. 'Take it easy.' "

Traynor and Grey looked at each other.

"He was alive when I left him."

"Then who killed him, Jordan? Who lured him into *your* office and took *your* gun and shot him in the chest and—"

They kept up the questions, kept hammering away like a properly efficient team. They got nowhere. Jordan never contradicted himself and never made very much sense. They kicked his story apart and he stayed with it anyway. After fifteen more minutes of getting nowhere they took him back to his cell and locked him away. Traynor stopped to stare at him, at the small round face peering out through the bars of the cage. Jordan looked trapped.

Two hours later, Traynor pushed a pile of papers to one side of his desk, eased his chair back, and stood up. Grey asked him where he was going.

"Out," Traynor told him.

"He said that Jim Jordan was trying to ruin him," Mrs. Hofert said. "I always felt . . . well, Dave felt persecuted sometimes. He had so many big plans that came to nothing. He thought the world was ganging up on him. I never believed that Jim would actually—"

"We think it happened during an argument," Traynor told her. "Jordan got excited, didn't know exactly what he was doing. If he had planned to murder your husband he would have picked a brighter way to do it. But in the heat of an argument things happen in a hurry."

"The heat of an argument." She sat for a long time looking at nothing at all. Then she said, "I believe everything has a pattern, Mr. Traynor. Do you believe that?"

Traynor didn't answer.

"Dave's life—and his death, trying, struggling, working so very hard and getting every bad break there was. Getting bad breaks because he tried so hard; because he wasn't prudent about money. And then having everything build to a climax with everything going wrong at once. And the tragic ending, dying at what he could only have thought of as the worst possible moment. You see, all he wanted to do was provide for me and for the boys. He was . . . he was the kind of man who would have thought it a triumph to die well-insured." More long silence. "And not even that. A year ago, six months ago, all his policies were paid up. Then, as things went wrong, he cashed the policies to get money to recoup his losses, and lost that, too. And then the final irony of dying without anything to leave us but a legacy of debts. Do you see the pattern, Mr. Traynor?"

"I think so," Traynor said.

He got very busy then. He went to the lawyer he had spoken to earlier, went alone without Grey. He asked the lawyer some questions, went to an insurance man and asked more questions. He called the Haber girl, and with her he went over the few hours prior to Hofert's death. He got the autopsy results, the lab photos, the lab report. He went to the Hofert & Jordan office and stood in the room where Hofert had died, visualizing everything, running it through in his mind.

It was pushing six o'clock. He picked up a phone, called headquarters and got through to Grey. "Don't leave yet," he said. "I'll be right over. Stay put."

"You got something?"

"Yes," he said.

They were in a small cubbyhole office off the main room. Grey sat at a desk.

Traynor stood up and did a lot of pacing.

"There were no fingerprints on the gun," he said.

"So? Jordan wiped it."

"Why?"

"Why? If you shot somebody, would you leave prints on the gun?"

Traynor walked over to the door, turned, came halfway back. "If I was going to wipe prints off a gun I would also do something about setting up an alibi," he said. "The way we've got it figured, Jordan killed strictly on impulse and reacted like a scared rabbit. He went for his gun, shot Hofert, ran out of the building and went home and stayed there shaking. He didn't sponge up blood, he didn't try to lug Hofert out of his office, didn't do a thing to disguise the killing. He left the gun right there, didn't try any of the tricks a panicky killer might try. But he wiped the prints off the gun."

"He must have been half out of his mind."

"It still doesn't add. There's another way, though, that does."

"Go on."

"Suppose you're Hofert. Now—"

"Why do we always have to suppose I'm the dead one?"

"Shut up," Traynor said. "Suppose you're David Hofert. You're deep in debt and you can't see your way clear. You look at yourself in the mirror and figure you're a failure. You want money for your wife, security for your kids. But you haven't got a penny, your insurance policies have lapsed, and your whole world is caving in on you. You're frantic."

"I don't—".

"Wait. You've always been a little paranoid. Now you think the whole world is after you and your partner is purposely trying to make things rough for you. You'd like to go and jump off a bridge, but that wouldn't get you anywhere. If you died in an accident, at least your wife and kids would get the hundred grand, the insurance dough which Jordan would turn over to them for your share of the business. Suicide voids that policy. If you kill yourself, they wind up with nothing."

Grey was nodding slowly now.

"But if your partner kills you—"

"What happens then?"

"It's a cute deal," Traynor said. "I went over it twice, with the lawyer

and with the agent who wrote the policies. Now, each man is insured for a hundred grand with that amount payable to the other or the other's heirs. If Jordan kills Hofert, he can't collect. You can't profit legally through the commission of a felony. But the insurance company still has to pay off.

"If the policy's paid up, and if it's been in force over two years, the company has to make it good. They can't hand the dough to Jordan if he's the killer, but they have to pay somebody."

"Who? I don't understand you."

"The dead man's estate. Hofert's estate. It can't go to Jordan because he's the murderer, and it can't go to Jordan's heirs because he never has legal title to it to pass on. And the company can't keep it, so it can only go to Hofert's wife and kids."

Grey hesitated, then nodded.

"That's the only way Hofert's family ever gets a dime. They get that hundred thousand as insurance on Hofert's life, and they collect another hundred thousand when Jordan goes to the chair for murder, and they have at least half the business as well. All Hofert has to do is find a way to kill himself and make it look like murder, and he sends all that dough to them and has the satisfaction of sticking Jordan with a murder rap. We get the other kind all the time, the murders that are faked to look like suicides. This one went the opposite way."

"How did he do it?"

"The easiest way in the world," Traynor said. "He covered all bets, gave Jordan motive and means and opportunity. He argued with him all day in front of the secretary. He fixed it so that he and Jordan were alone in the office. When Jordan left, he went into Jordan's office and got Jordan's gun. He messed up the place to stage a struggle. He wrapped the gun in a tissue or something to keep his prints off it. He stood in front of the desk, off to the side, and he angled the shot so that it would look as though he'd been shot by somebody behind the desk. He shot himself in a spot that would be sure to kill him but that would leave him a minute or two of life to drop the gun in a convenient spot. That may have been accidental; maybe he aimed for the heart and missed. We'll never know."

"What does the lab say?"

Traynor shrugged. "Maybe and maybe not, as far as they're concerned. It could have been that way—that's as much as they can say, and that's

enough. The paraffin test didn't show that Hofert had fired a gun, but it wouldn't, not if he had a tissue or a handkerchief around his hand. There were tissues on the floor, and a lot of papers that he could have used. The bullet trajectory fits well enough. It's something you don't think of right off the bat. The way Hofert had it planned, we weren't supposed to think of it at all. And it almost worked. It almost had Jordan nailed."

"Now what?"

Traynor looked at him.

"Now we tell Jordan to relax," he said. "And after the inquest calls it suicide, we let him go—very simple."

"No," Grey said. "I don't believe it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's crazy. You don't kill yourself to stick somebody for murder. It's too damned iffy, anyway. Why did Jordan stay home that morning?"

"He was feeling sick."

"Sure. He didn't come in, he didn't even call his office. You can make a suicide theory out of it. You can also read it as a very clear-cut murder, and that's the way I'd read it. You want to let Jordan off and take a couple hundred thousand away from Hofert's wife. Is that right?"

"Yes."

Traynor looked at the floor. "And you want to see Jordan in the chair for this one."

"That's the way it reads to me."

"Well, I won't go along with that, Phil."

"And I won't buy suicide. You fought this one because it was too simple, and now you've got us stuck with two answers, one easy and one tough, and I like the easy one and you like the tough one. I hope to hell Jordan confesses and makes it easy for us."

"He won't," Traynor said. "He's innocent."

"How sure are you?"

"Positive."

"That's how sure I am he's guilty. What do we do if he doesn't confess, if he sticks to his story and the lab can't cut it any finer for us? What do we do? Toss a coin?"

No one said anything for a few minutes.

Traynor looked at his watch.

Grey lit a cigarette.

Traynor said, "I don't buy murder."

"I don't buy suicide."

"He won't confess, Phil. And we'll never know. If Jordan goes on trial he'll get off because I'll hand my angle to his lawyer. He'll beat it. But we'll never know, not really. You'll always think he's guilty and I'll always think he isn't, and we'll never know."

"Maybe we ought to toss that coin."

"If we did," Traynor said, "it would stand on end. It's been that kind of a day."

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The Slave

by Henry Slesar

Sensing the imminence of a marriage proposal, Inger dressed and made up for her dinner date with special care and with no sacrifice of punctuality. Corey liked his women pretty, punctual, and, normally, a few years younger than Inger could claim to be. But, still shading thirty, she refused to suffer any pangs of desperation during their two-month courtship.

For a good omen, Corey took her to the Windward. It was expensive and intimate. Candles flickered. Martinis were served in chilled glasses. After the meal, over a small cup of coffee and a large brandy, his eyes looked warmly into hers, his voice dropped an octave, and if it weren't for her sudden attention to a man with a wide, grinning mouth, the Moment might have arrived. The man's grin was so feral, and so obviously directed at Corey, that she felt sure of an interruption. She was right. The man ambled toward their table and broke Corey's mood.

"Hello, Core," the stranger said. "Thought I recognized you, but it's so filthy dark in here." He gave Inger a display of long white teeth, lengthening a squat, almost squirrel-like face. His eyes were pale blue, and his thin blond hair curled up tightly at the end of each strand. Inger glanced at Corey and felt an almost electrical shock at what she saw. The muscles around Corey's mouth had weakened and were trembling.

"Hello, Ray," Corey said, and then stammered, "this is Inger Flood. Inger, Ray Chaffee."

Inger murmured, "Hello."

"Lovely," Chaffee said, drawing in his breath with a wet sound. "Very, very nice, Core. Must have been a lovely cozy dinner you had. Too bad you've got to leave now, eh?"

"Ray, for God's sake!"

"But you were lucky at that. I could have spotted you before the steak. It *was* steak, Miss Flood? Core never had much eating imagination."

"We both had steak," Inger said, determined to remain cool. "I don't have much imagination, either."

The smile went, leaving an expression of bland malice.

"Go on, Core," Chaffee said, in a musical voice. "Get out. Leave the brandy, I'll finish it for you. Your credit rating's still good here, isn't it? Stop at the desk and tell them to add your bill to your account. Go on, Core—move!"

Inger's shock became bewilderment. Corey was standing.

"Inger, I'm sorry—"

"Sorry? About what?"

"I've got to leave," he said miserably. "I'll call you later—at home."

"No," Chaffee said sharply. "No more calls tonight, Core, stop financing the phone company. You just go home and go beddy-bye. Tomorrow—well, we'll see about tomorrow."

Inger started to rise too, but incredibly, the stranger's hand was on her shoulder, pushing her back against the seat. "Not you, Miss Flood," he said. "No hurry for you."

"What is this?" Inger said, feeling anger at last. "Corey, will you please tell this man—"

"Now don't make a fuss," Chaffee said, mock-soothingly. Then he slid into the seat beside her. Corey hesitated, until Chaffee jerked a hand into the air, snapping his wrist in a gesture of command. Corey spun about as if lashed by an invisible whip and moved toward the exit, tension written in the back lines of his coat. Inger made another attempt to rise, but Chaffee caught her elbow. "Please," he said. "Seriously. Don't go yet. No use sitting here alone."

"I won't sit alone," she snapped. "Or with you. Now take your hand off my arm or I start screaming. See what that does for *your* credit rating."

There was no sign of Corey on the street outside. She fully expected him to pop out of a doorway and explain the point of the joke. But except for a taxi at a hack stand, the street was deserted. She took the cab.

In the morning the telephone, not the alarm, woke her. "Inger?"

"Go to hell," she murmured.

"I don't blame you for being sore," Corey said. "I can't tell you about it right now, but I will, I promise. I just didn't know Chaffee was in the restaurant; hell, I didn't even know he was in *town*. I've been rid of the son of a bitch for six weeks, his company sent him on an assignment to South America—"

"Oh, shut up, Corey!" Inger said, springing into a sitting position. "It was a very bad joke, but I'm not awake enough to listen to any apology."

"Will you have lunch with me?"

"No."

"Please, Inger."

She met him in a restaurant she'd never heard of, in an out-of-the-way neighborhood. She didn't connect the fact of its obscurity with Ray Chaffee until she groped her way through the dark interior to Corey's secluded table in the rear.

"Tell me something," she said. "Are you *hiding* from that man?"

"What?"

"This *grotto* you picked. It looks like a place frequented only by Portuguese leather tanners or something. Did you pick it because of your friend?"

"Don't be silly," he grinned. "It's just a nice, dark place. Good for kissy-face." He planted a kiss on her mouth, obtaining only partial response. Then he ordered drinks, and without waiting for her question, answered it. "Yes, of course it was a gag, what happened last night. But it's so stupid it almost defies explanation—"

"Try."

"It's a kind of bet, a running joke I have with Chaffee."

"But who is he? Do you work for him? Is he your *boss*?"

"No, no; he's just a friend, using the word loosely. He's a computer engineer. We went to college together. Chaffee, me, a few other guys. We had a little poker club, but a couple of marriages broke it up. You know."

"No," Inger said. "I don't know anything. The way that man *ordered* you out—and the disgusting way you *took* it."

Corey leaned back into the shadows and laughed. His amusement sounded genuine, but she wasn't convinced. "God, I must have looked like a dope. But it had to be that way, honey. I can't expect you to understand. All I expect is—" He stopped.

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't expect anything *now*. But in two minutes—"

"What's going to change in two minutes?"

"Maybe a lot." He slipped his hand into his pocket and came out with a small, velvety box. She held her breath. He said, "Remember my telling you about that half-wit I was engaged to?"

"Leila?"

"Yes, Leila. Remember I said she returned my engagement ring?"
Inger stiffened as he opened the box, but it was empty.

"I don't get it," she said.

"No," Corey said. "I wouldn't let you wear *her* lousy ring. I stopped at the jeweler's this morning and made a deal for a clean swap. You can go there anytime and pick out one you like. That is, if you want to."

Inger looked from the empty satin groove to his face, but another image intercepted.

It was a waiter, carrying a red telephone.

"What the hell," Corey growled. "Must be a mistake."

"No, sir," the waiter said. "For you, Mr. Jensen."

Corey snatched the receiver and said a puzzled hello. Inches from her ear, Inger heard the diaphragm vibrate with the metallic, singsong voice of Ray Chaffee.

"Ladybug, ladybug," he said, "fly away home. Your house is on fire, your children will burn."

"Ray, goddamn you—"

"That's insolent, old boy, I won't tolerate insolence."

"What do you want? How did you know I was here? Listen, are you following me again, damn it?"

"Leave, Corey baby, vamoose, scram. Your presence in that place offends me. I'm right across the street, in a phone booth. I'll expect to see you under the canopy in the next two minutes. All right, I'll give you three."

"Corey," Inger said, her head buzzing. "Hang up on him!"

Corey did exactly that. Inger thought the joke might be over, but she was wrong. Corey was crumpling his napkin and pushing back his chair. "Look, Inger," he said.

"No! Don't tell me. You're really going to leave?"

"I've got to, honey. It's something I can't help. Look!" He thrust the velvet box into her hand. "The jeweler's name is on the inside. Maybe you could stop by there on your way home tonight—"

"Corey," she said deliberately, "if you walk out of here now and don't tell me *why*—"

"Order some lunch," he said, with a nervous glance at the front window. He dropped a ten-dollar bill on his plate. "Have the roast beef. It's good here. I'll call you."

"If you go now, I don't *want* you to call me!"

But he went out.

She didn't order lunch. She used the money to pay for their one round of drinks and left without concern for the grunting displeasure of the waiter. In the office she got hungry at three and ate a gooey dessert purchased from the coffee cart.

Corey showed up at her apartment, unannounced, at ten-thirty that night. She had already dressed for bed in something so flimsy that the situation might have been provocative, but Corey's mood, and hers, for that matter, precluded anything but talk and whisky. They sat in her small, untidy living room, and Corey said, "O.K., Inger, I'll tell you the whole thing. I couldn't before, that was part of the deal, but I saw Ray and he O.K.'d it. He even *liked* the idea of your knowing; it gave him a cheap thrill; the kinky bastard." He stopped and finished his Scotch.

Inger waited, until Corey said:

"I'm his slave, Inger."

He went for a refill, using the action as an excuse not to face her.

"I know that sounds pretty wild, but it's not as crazy as you might think. I don't mean he *bought* me on the open market, or that we've got some nutty kind of Krafft-Ebing sex thing going. We're both straight, although that's a hell of a way to describe Ray Chaffee. What I mean is, I *have* to do everything he tells me to do, practically everything, anyway. Oh, nothing that would cause me physical harm; he can't tell me to jump out the window, for instance, that wouldn't be in the rules—"

"The *rules*?" Inger asked.

"I've been his slave for nine, ten months now. I've got less than ten weeks before it's all over. Don't worry! I used to think about you, about *us*, in this situation; and I almost decided I shouldn't see you, not until this damned year was up. But with Chaffee being away, I thought I could take a chance—"

"A chance on what?"

"He was in South America, you see. It must have killed him to be sent away just then. He was just beginning to *enjoy* having a slave, being the master. He was getting meaner every day, thinking of more ways to make me suffer—"

"I can't be hearing right," the girl said. "I must have gone to bed an hour ago, and this is a dream."

"All the way over here," Corey said tightly, "I kept trying to decide which was worse, telling you or not telling you. Either way, I might lose you. Do you want another drink?"

"No."

"Well, I do." Coréy got his second refill. When he returned, he was willing to face her eyes. "Inger, here's the truth. About ten months ago, Chaffee and I and a couple of other guys, this little poker-and-girl club I told you about—"

"You didn't mention the girls," she said flatly.

"They never got in the way of the poker. Anyway, we were all sitting around one night, putting away a fair amount of booze, and somehow we got on the subject of slavery. Present-day slavery, I mean. It exists, you know, there's still quite a slave trade in the Middle East and places like that. Anyway, there was one thing we were in agreement about, two things, really. One was—isn't slavery awful? Not very original, of course, but like being on the side of Mother and apple pie and the American flag. But we also agreed that slavery was lousy for the slave, but pretty damned good for the master. Putting all the moral considerations aside, what was so bad about having a couple or three slaves? Hell, it must have been wonderful, let's face it. That's what made slavery so popular for centuries, even in those supposedly enlightened civilizations like Greece and Rome. Those cats knew the moral wrongness of what they were doing, but they didn't have the machinery to make their lives comfortable, so they justified the practice. Even today, think of all those people scrambling for servants, all those fat ladies in the women's clubs spending half their lives talking to their servants and the other half talking about them. And when somebody says, 'My little Bernice is a perfect gem,' they mean she's more like a slave, like a lovely old-time Southern darky slave than a paid servant. Am I right?"

"Oh, God," Inger said. "Spare me the social comment, Corey."

"O.K. O.K. All I'm saying is, slavery is *attractive*. Hell, Chaffee even found a quotation by Tolstoy about it, only I think he looked it up after the bet."

"The *bet*?"

"That's what I'm talking about, that's how it all started. Anyway, you know what Tolstoy was, some kind of Russian saint about individual freedom, only he wrote in his diary that slavery is an evil, but it's an extremely *nice* evil."

"But it's still *evil*, isn't it?"

"Because it's *involuntary*. Slaves don't choose to be what they are, they get rounded up by traders, or sold by their papas, like girl-children used to be sold in China, or captured in wars; like the Greeks and Romans. But if it were voluntary, if you closed that moral gap—"

"Is that what you did? *Volunteered* to be a slave?"

"In a way," Corey said. "In a way, Inger. That's how the evening ended, in a kind of bet that Chaffee and I made with each other. We were all pretty juiced, but we put down the terms and rules and conditions. One of the rules was secrecy, that's what he's allowing me to break tonight—"

"You really mean this, don't you? It's not a joke?"

"No," he said soberly. "This is the real skinny, Inger. Chaffee bet that I couldn't survive as his personal slave for a solid year. But now it's almost over. I win, he loses, and things go back to normal. But I couldn't quit now, don't you see? After ten months, I'd be crazy to give up now, not even if you asked me, not even if you—you made it a condition for filling that ring box."

"Well! That's putting it on the line, isn't it?"

"I'm not throwing away these ten months. Chaffee's made me see Hell, and he may get worse, but I won't give him the satisfaction of quitting before the year is up."

"You're children! Two stupid kids! You ought to be spanked!"

"It didn't start out too badly," Corey said, studying the ceiling. "Chaffee wasn't used to having a slave. At first, he *asked* me to do things, he was polite, he used the word 'please.' And all his commands were petty, like running errands, going to the library for him, finding him taxis. . . . It was easy work."

"And then he changed?"

"He couldn't ask me to do anything that would endanger my health, or cost me my job, or money—"

"But he could humiliate you. He could do that."

"He couldn't make me do, you know, display window kind of things in public. Nothing that would get me picked up by the cops for psyching. But anything else—I'd *have* to do *them*, or I wouldn't be his slave, would I? A slave gives unquestioned obedience, that's the heart and soul of it, the inability to refuse a master's orders. But it took Chaffee a long time, almost half a year, to find the—joy in it."

"The joy?"

"Yeah," Corey said, turning his glass round and round. "There's a joy in it, almost an ecstasy. It's more than the convenience of somebody doing your bidding, there's a power thing at the heart of it. That's why people knock themselves out for power—political, social, money, you name it. It's fun to rule people, make them jump, have the hoop and whip in your hand."

Inger made a sound of disgust.

"It's true, honey. I'm the slave, and he's the master, but I can see what it does. That raw, immediate power over another human being. Anyway, after six months, Chaffee began to see the time slipping by, and it made him desperate, desperate and mean. His commands started getting tougher and more frequent. That's when we stopped being friends and became what we are now, master and slave. Nothing but that. And that's when he started to enjoy himself."

Inger went to him, looking flushed and beautiful.

"And you wouldn't give it up? Not even if I asked you?"

"I told you. If we'd met five, six months ago, before Chaffee started cracking the whip, maybe I would have been willing to—to lose all those months I invested. But not now."

"Corey, do you love me?"

"Oh, for pete's sake, haven't I said *that* yet?"

Later, she asked him again.

"No, Inger," he told her. "It's not possible. You think those restaurant things were bad? There have been worse. I've done every kind of dirty job for him. I've been his valet, his butler, his cleaning woman. I've given up nights, all my weekends, even lunch hours when he wanted me to. Then he started following me around, making me give up habits, pleasures, friends."

"And women?"

"He's broken me up with every girl I've dated. Once, he even took over the girl I was with, he even told her what I was to him—"

"I thought the ground rules—"

"They only apply to me, not to him: the master doesn't have to keep secrets, only the slave. And that night, he told her, and that half-wit girl—"

"Was it Leila?"

"Yes, and maybe Chaffee did me a favor there. But I won't forget the way he walked in on us—"

"And told her you were his *slave*?"

"He told her and proved it. He made me crawl, Inger, in front of *her*. And that half-wit *laughed*. She thought it was funny; hilarious; she asked Chaffee for a piece of the action; she wanted to play too. And for the rest of the night, I was *her* slave too, because that's part of the bargain. If you've got one master, you're the slave of the whole human race."

"Oh, Corey!" Inger pressed her face against his shoulder. "How could you do it? Why didn't you *kill* him? I would have smashed his face. And hers too!"

"Sure, Inger, slaves revolt, that's part of the fun. Only I couldn't, you see. I had too much invested—"

The telephone rang. It was well past midnight, and Inger's phone was normally silent at that hour.

"Should I answer?" she whispered. "Do you think it's—"

"I know it is," Corey said.

Inger picked it up, and Ray Chaffee crooned at her. "Hello, baby, how are you? Did you get an earful? Did our little boy cry out his heart to you?"

"Hello, Mr. Chaffee," Inger said. "I'm glad you called. *Delighted*. It gives me a chance to tell you what I think of you."

"Save it," Chaffee said coolly. "Let me speak to the laddie."

"Not until you hear me first."

"Sweetie, you bug me, and I bug *him*. Dig?"

Inger hesitated, and then handed Corey the receiver.

Corey did no more than listen for a while, losing more and more color. Then he said:

"Yeah, I got it . . . O.K., I said I would and I will." He held the receiver in the air, toward Inger, but didn't look at her. In a monotone, he said: "Ray wants me to leave now, honey, but he doesn't want you to be lonely. He says he'll be glad to come up here and keep you company. He says he knows a way to keep you warm and cozy."

"Corey!"

"I'd appreciate it if you would, Inger. I can't force you, of course, but I'd look on it as a real favor if you let Ray come up here now."

In the receiver, she could hear Chaffee's dry, musical chuckle.

"Get out of here!" Inger cried. "Get the hell out, Corey!"

"Inger, please. Just talk to him then, will you? Talk to him about it." He brought the phone closer, but she backed away. Corey swallowed and put the receiver to his mouth again. He said, "All right, damn you, I did it. But she won't talk to you, and that's something I can't control." He hung up and turned to Inger. His eyes were wet. "Honey, listen, I promised I would say that. It was the price for telling you the truth."

"Didn't you hear me? Get out of here, Corey, I don't want you here. I don't want to see you again. Ever!"

Corey shrugged. It wasn't a gesture of indifference; it was resignation. Then he went out, closing the door softly.

She didn't hear from him again until the weekend. On Saturday afternoon, he called and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper.

"I'm at the Frederick Gallery," he said. "On Madison. This time I turned the tables. I've been spying on *him*. His apartment is right across the street, and I just saw him pull his car out of the garage. So it's safe for us to meet."

"It may be safe," Inger said coldly. "That doesn't mean I want to."

But she met him at the gallery. It was full of rolling seascapes. Corey greeted her with a pale smile and said, "I forgot to tell you to bring your Dramamine." Instead of laughing, she started to cry, not loud enough to disturb the rest of the patrons. He drew her into a corner, shielded them with a catalogue, and said, "Look, here's what I figured out. This thing with Chaffee will be over in another nine weeks. I won't see you again until then, I won't even try. He'll find out and only make things worse."

"Nine weeks! Corey, it's so *unfair!*"

"But it's the only way. Better he thinks we've broken up, then he'll leave us—you—alone. After that—well, maybe you won't have met someone else in the meantime—"

"You moron!" she said tragically, holding on to his lapel. "Do you think I want someone else?"

"Inger, let's go to that jewelry store. Right now. Maybe if you have my ring on your finger, it'll make a difference."

She picked out a simple diamond without baguettes or fancy mounting. Corey thought the ring unnecessarily severe, but Inger wanted it that way. On the way home, she reminded him that he had never made a formal proposal of marriage. He said he was determined to have the

proper romantic setting, so they walked to Fifty-ninth Street and took a horse-drawn carriage into the park. She cried most of the time, even after he had proposed. She clung to him and whispered, "Corey, come home with me; don't leave me yet. You saw that horrible man driving away, maybe he won't bother us. Come back home with me, Corey."

They went to her apartment house. There was a small maroon convertible parked near the front awning. Ray Chaffee wasn't at the wheel, but Corey knew the car.

"He's here, Inger. I'd better go."

"Corey; please! He might be waiting in the lobby, or upstairs in the hall. I'm afraid of him!"

"You don't have to be. He doesn't have any hold over you. If he starts anything, tell him you'll call the police. If he threatens *me*, say you don't give a damn, that we've broken up."

"This is horrible!"

"I'll call you," Corey said hurriedly. Then he turned and walked rapidly away.

Just as she had feared, Chaffee was sitting in the lobby on a frayed blue wing chair.

"Good evening, Miss Flood. I wonder if you've seen our friend, Mr. Jensen?"

"No," she said. "I haven't seen your friend, and I don't *want* to see him."

"Then maybe you're in the market for a new friend?" he grinned. "I'm not such bad merchandise. Slightly soiled, but serviceable."

"Good night," she said, when the elevator arrived, but he put his hand on the cushioned edge of the door.

"Don't kid a kidder, Miss Flood. Where are you hiding the laddie? Got him stashed in a closet or under your bed?"

She paused. There was a doorman somewhere in the vicinity, probably reading the *Daily News* in front of the service elevator, but she changed her mind about calling him.

"All right," Inger said. "Why don't you come upstairs and see for yourself? Something I want to ask you, anyway."

He looked surprised. For a moment she had him off balance. But inside her apartment, he recovered and slipped an arm about her waist. She did a dance step to avoid him, and said, "I want you to do me a favor. I want you to call off this bet you have with Corey."

He was either perplexed or amused.

"You want me to free the slave? Issue an emancipation proclamation?"

"Yes," Inger said. "He's had enough of the joke, and I think you have too."

Oddly enough, his smile went away.

"You know something? You're right. It's become a burden; not just to poor old Corey, but to me. It's a job having a slave, you know that? It's a responsibility, like inheriting a whole lot of money. You're driven to do something about it all the time. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night wondering how to use Corey the next day. Sounds sick, doesn't it? But then, you probably think I am sick. Corey's probably told you how mean and vicious I am."

"And it isn't true?"

"All masters seem mean and vicious to their slaves. But don't worry. Old Corey's going to get his pound of flesh."

"How much?" Inger said.

"What?"

"How much is the pound worth? I'm willing to make a deal for it, Mr. Chaffee."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're scared silly that Corey is going to *make* that year. You can't dream up things horrible enough to make him quit. But I've got a claim on Corey too. And if you do what I say, I'll see that you get your money back."

Grinning again, he asked, "Is that an offer?"

"Yes. If you call this thing off—right now—I promise that you'll get back every penny Corey wins."

"My! You really think you can twist the laddie around your finger? Isn't that interesting." He smoothed a hand over his thin blond hair, making the tiny curls spring up. Then he began a slow walk toward her. "You know something? I recommend that you try another form of persuasion. You have no idea how little interest I have in money."

His hands were on her. She gave her body a half-twist and found herself entangled in his arms. He was stronger than he looked, and she became frightened. She struck him with her left hand, across the cheek. She aimed the blow badly and felt the edge of the new diamond scrape into his flesh. The eye reddened and swelled almost at once, and Chaffee made a sound of pain and covered his face with one hand.

"You hurt me!" he said peevishly. "You stupid girl. Why did you have to do that?"

He took out a neatly folded handkerchief, pressed it against his cheek, and then looked at the bloody traces on the fabric. He went pale, and Inger thought he might become ill.

"You stupid girl," he repeated.

He held the handkerchief against his cheek again and went to the door. Inger looked down at the engagement ring circling her finger, touched the diamond, and said aloud, "Girl's best friend."

She didn't know what time it was when the knocking started. She knew it wasn't an hour for knocking, for all that commotion at her front door. The luminous dial on her bedside clock told her it was after three. She groped for the robe at the foot of the bed and stumbled into the living room, wanting only to silence that terrible, obscene knocking at her door. She opened it and saw them both, Chaffee and Corey, Chaffee grinning horribly. There was something misshapen about the grin, something about his face that belonged back in the haze of a nightmare; then she realized it was his eye. His cheek was lumpish and yellow-blue, the skin shiny and pulling tight. She turned away from the sight and looked at Corey, wondering why they had broken through the dark fabric of her night.

When they were in the living room, Corey found the switch that filled the room with painful light.

"Corey, what is this?"

"Inger," he began. His voice was choked, and he was clenching his fists. "God help me, Inger, I'm sorry about this. But you shouldn't have done what you did—"

"Tell her," Chaffee ordered.

Corey reached out and held her arm. "Inger, you hurt him, you know. You could have hurt him seriously."

"Tell her who," Chaffee said. "Who she hurt."

"The master," Corey said, with gritted teeth. "Look at what you did to him, Inger. Do you see it?"

"Corey, let me go," Inger said.

"Now tell her," Chaffee said. "Go on, Core, tell Miss Flood what she has to do."

"Don't be sore at me, darling. After tonight, I won't—I mean, he's

promised—no more, not after tonight. We'll leave you alone, both of us. But you've got to do it."

"Do what?"

"Kiss it," Corey said. "I'm sorry, Inger. Kiss the eye. You hurt it; he's really hurt badly. *Kiss the eye, Inger!*"

He was pulling her toward Chaffee, forcing her face close to his. Chaffee was grinning, only it wasn't a grin, it was a death mask, *a.risus sardonicus*. Inger screamed and hit out at Corey. He tried to catch her hands and she could see the suffering on his face. She loathed and pitied him. Then he held her wrists imprisoned, and he was shouting something at Chaffee. Inger went limp, and Corey guided her to the sofa. She shut her eyes and heard Corey say other half-angry, half-placatory things to Chaffee. She didn't open her eyes until she heard Chaffee say:

"All right, laddie, all right. You've done your duty."

She turned her head and saw Chaffee marching to the door. And Corey following. The slave, obedient, his task done, followed the master. They went out, leaving Inger alone.

September went by and most of October.

She heard from Corey only once. It was a letter, badly typed on office stationery. It read:

"Inger—I know you hate me now. Does it make any sense to say I love you? The chains come off on Sunday, October 28. I'll call you then. I won't blame you for anything you say to me. Corey."

Early in October she had met a man she liked. He was good looking and seemed to have money. He dated her three nights in one week and tried, not too strenuously, to seduce her on the following weekend. When she started to cry, he got her to confess that there was an attachment to another man. She had tried to think of Corey as dead, missing, gone away, but he was none of those things. He was still around and October 28th, freedom day, manumission, was very close. She told the man she would not see him again.

On the Friday preceding the 28th, a friend named Sylvia came to stay for the weekend; they were painting her apartment and she was allergic to the fumes. She spent most of the time talking about someone named Leonard, who was married, asking Inger's advice in a plaintive voice and sulking whenever Inger told her to dump him.

Saturday night, prompted by alcohol, Inger lost her reticence and told

Sylvia about Corey Jensen. Her friend listened in fascination, her own romantic problems momentarily forgotten. She agreed vociferously with Inger's own conclusions. "Terrible! Awful! You're better off without him, believe me."

But the more she talked about Corey, and the more Sylvia concurred, the more Inger realized how much she missed him.

"Do you suppose he'll call?" Sylvia asked, wide-eyed. "Do you think he'll have the nerve?"

"I don't know," Inger answered.

Sylvia was still asleep on Sunday morning when Inger awoke and started looking at the telephone. It still hadn't rung by two, when Sylvia left, eager not to miss an afternoon rendezvous with Leonard.

At three, Inger decided that her pride wasn't worth the suspense. She telephoned Corey's apartment. The phone was busy and she hung up quickly, in hopes that it was her line he was trying to reach. Nothing happened. Fifteen minutes later, she had dialed the number so often that her index finger ached. She forced herself to wait half an hour before calling again. The phone rang, but there was no answer. She swore at herself for making a wrong decision.

Shortly after four, she put on a light raincoat and went out. She took a taxi to Corey's apartment house, trying not to think about right or wrong, saving face or losing it.

Inger fully expected to face the necessity of camping on his doorstep, but she was lucky. Corey came to the door, carrying the telephone like a briefcase.

"I hope it's me you're calling," Inger said lightly. "You promised you would, remember?"

He twisted the cord around his fingers.

"I was going to call you, Inger, honest. Only something came up. Look, give me a minute."

"It's all right," she said. "I didn't expect you to fall at my feet. I've still got your ring, you know. I had to find out whether you wanted me to keep it."

"Of course I do." The words should have been accompanied by an embrace, but his fingers were still glued to the phone. "Look, honey, sit down. Wait just a minute while I make this call."

He put the phone on the table and dialed fumblingly.

"Hello, this is Corey Jensen again. Yeah, I know, but I thought you

might have heard something since . . ." His voice rose angrily. "Well, you work for him, damn it, I thought he might tell you. All right, give him the message."

He hung up, slamming the receiver hard.

"What is it, Corey? You don't look well."

"Inger, will you please wait?" He was dialing again. His face was moist. He needed a shave, and the perspiration was glinting against the stubble on his chin.

"Hello, Marta?" he said. "Corey. This is only a long shot, but have you seen Ray? . . . No, I don't *mean* anything by it, I just wanted to know. Listen, is Ronnie home? . . . No, don't bother, if you don't know where Ray is, he sure as hell won't . . . No, I can't talk now, I'm running late. Good-by, Marta."

He hung up. Before he could dial again, Inger said: "Now that's enough, Corey! If you can't take *one minute* between phone calls for me, I'd better leave."

He reacted blankly to her threat. He said: "You don't understand, honey. I'm trying to find him. He's not at his apartment, even his maid doesn't know where he is."

"Who?"

"Ray Chaffee. He's gone!" He rubbed his hands against his trousers nervously. "I think he's running away, damn him!"

"You mean because of the bet? Because you won?"

The phone rang and he leaped for it.

"Yes, I'm Mr. Jensen, I placed the call . . . Hello, Mr. Valdez! . . . Yes, it's urgent that I locate Mr. Chaffee. I think he's taking a Panagra flight today, but I don't know which one . . . Yes, it's life or death, a member of his family, very ill . . . I know it's against the rules, but—what?" His eyes flashed. "Yes, I got it. Flight 33, leaving at six-thirty . . . No, a message won't do it, he might think it was a mistake . . . I can get to the airport on time . . . Yes, thank you very much, Mr. Valdez!"

He hung up, breathing fury and triumph.

"It's true! He's cheating me! Going to South America!"

"Corey, I don't understand."

"That trip of his last June. He was setting up a job down there, preparing his line of retreat."

"But why? Did he lose that much money?"

"I've got to go, Inger. I've got to get to that airport!"

"Was he really that desperate? Corey, for God's sake, how much money was it?"

He was moving toward the closet, but she stepped in front of him.

"Money!" he shouted. "You really think it was money?"

"But you told me. The bet."

"I never mentioned money, that was your own conclusion. And it wasn't a bet, either. It was a swap, a bargain, an exchange. Understand?"

"Corey!"

"Now you really think I'm sick, don't you? Well, think what you want. Only I'm telling you this, Inger. He's not getting away with it. He's had his year, and now I get mine!"

"A year! You mean he's *your* slave now—for a year?"

"That's right, honey. Mr. Chaffee's going to pay his debt. He's made me pay and now it's his turn. Now I've got the hoop and the whip. And he's going to jump! If I have to drag him off that plane."

He went to the door and Inger clutched his arm.

"Corey, for God's sake, don't! Let him go. You can't do to him what he did to you—it's too awful. It isn't human!"

"Cut it out, Inger, it's a long drive out there—"

"Corey, I couldn't stand another year like that, I couldn't!"

"But it wouldn't be the same this time, don't you see? This time *he's* the slave and I'm the master—"

"That won't make any difference! There's no difference between either one! I couldn't marry you like this, I couldn't live through it. I *won't* marry you, Corey!"

For a moment, his breathing slowed; and his eyes lost some of their fever. Then he said:

"I'm sorry, Inger. I can't help myself. There's nothing I can do now. It's just too late."

He went out, closing the door quickly. Before it latched, Inger opened it again and screamed after him as he went down the hallway to the elevator; screamed in a shrill voice she never knew she owned.

"Go on!" she said. "Go ahead! Go to your precious slave! I hope you'll be very happy with each other!"

She closed the door behind her, feeling that she should cry, but unable to bring any tears, she thought, "I'll bet they will be. I just bet they will."

Teeth in the Case

by Carl Henry Rathjen

No one suspected him for a killer. He was just part of the crowd standing back of McCabe, chief of Valley View's three-man police department, as they awaited the groundbreaking for the food processing plant. He even added his remarks to the ribbing directed at Mayor Bronson, who was not going to perform the ceremony with the traditional gold-plated, be-ribboned spade.

"Wouldn't anyone trust you with his shovel, Your Honor? . . ."

"He's just gotten soft sitting in city hall doing nothing . . ."

Smiling good-naturedly, Mayor Bronson climbed aboard a backhoe. Taking the rear seat, he grasped shiny control knobs. The backhoe's scoop shovel reached way out to plunge steel teeth into the soft earth. As it drew back, gouging a trench, McCabe saw it digging up human bones.

"Hold it, Mayor," he barked. Behind him the killer's expression was no different, outwardly, from other startled faces pressing forward for a closer look. McCabe's grey eyes and voice were commanding. "Stand back. Knapperman," he called to one of his patrolmen, "keep everyone away from this area."

When the crowd was under control, McCabe went forward. The scoop had plowed midway through the remains, digging up vertebrae and ribs. A pelvic bone lay imbedded in the left wall of the trench.

"No signs of clothing," Mayor Bronson said shakily. "Must be an Indian from about a hundred years ago."

"It's been here a long time," McCabe agreed. "There's no flesh on the bones." He pointed to the right wall of the trench where earth had fallen away to expose a jawbone. "But that dental plate doesn't suggest this death occurred a hundred years ago." He spoke over his shoulder. "Knapperman, get on the horn and send for the medical examiner. Then get a screen to sift this ground for possible clues when he's finished."

McCabe opened his pocketknife and carefully scraped earth, slowly

bringing into view complete upper and lower dentures. They weren't modern pink plastic. The basic color was dark, almost like the earth, except for pink to simulate gums.

"Vulcanized dentures," he murmured. He cautiously uncovered more of the skull. In the frontal, just above and between the eye sockets, he found a bullet hole. It was too well placed to be regarded as an accidental shooting, and the burying of the body didn't suggest accident either.

Straightening slowly, McCabe looked at the curious faces in the crowd, particularly those of middle age and older. Every eye met his.

"This probably happened a good many years ago," he said. "Can anyone recall the unexplained disappearance of a man who wore dentures of a type that aren't made today?"

For a moment he got blank stares from the crowd. Then someone mentioned a name. Someone else said that man had had teeth like a horse. More recollections and negating arguments followed. McCabe almost wished he hadn't asked.

"All right," he sighed. Maybe he could get some idea of *when* it happened. He turned to lean, work-warped Jess Parkinson, who had sold this acreage to the food processing company.

"When did you last plow up in here, Jess?"

"Never in the twenty years I owned it. Used it for pasture. Sometimes disked the greens under, but no deep plowing."

"Who had it before you?" McCabe asked.

"I dunno. Ask him." Jess jerked a thumb toward greyheaded Verne Warner, who had a real estate and insurance office downtown.

"He's not stringing you, Mac," said Warner. "I sold him this property. It was part of an estate being settled, with the bank acting as executor. It had belonged to the Hammond family."

"Hammond?" McCabe repeated, trying to place the name.

Warner shook his head. "They were all killed in a railroad crossing accident. That was before you moved up here with your kids after your wife was . . ."

McCabe bleakly nodded at the painful reminder that Joan had been an innocent victim of a city bank holdup.

"How long did the Hammonds own this land?

"Long as I can remember," Warner replied, "and I've been here forty years myself." He shook his head again as McCabe glanced toward the trench. "No, Mac, not them. They were hard-working, respectable peo-

ple, went to the same church I go to, never knew them to say an unkind word toward anyone." Several of the older bystanders nodded.

Warner's wife, Agnes, short, plump, and grey, spoke up. "I knew them well. Imogene, their daughter, was my best friend. I was going to be her bridesmaid. They were wealthy, and it was to have been one of the biggest weddings ever—"

"Can you recall if they ever plowed up this field?" McCabe asked.

Mayor Bronson answered that. "Then the skeleton wouldn't have been waiting for me to dig it up for you."

McCabe turned as the medical examiner's car arrived. Behind him people began arguing again. "I don't care what anyone says, maybe those rich Hammonds did know, and that's why they never plowed . . ."

McCabe was intercepted by the president of the food processing company.

"How long do you expect to hold up construction here, Chief?"

"Until I'm sure I've got all possible clues to begin reconstructing what happened."

The executive laughed. "After twenty, thirty, forty or more years? Why don't you just rebury it and—"

"There's no statute of limitations on murder," McCabe said abruptly.

McCabe stood by impatiently as Bigbee, the medical examiner, hmmed to himself, studying the remains. He wondered if this case was as old and seemingly hopeless as it appeared. At last Bigbee rose to face him.

"There are some odd factors here, Chief."

"What have you discovered?" McCabe demanded. "Is it okay to have that soil sifted now?"

Bigbee nodded. "But I doubt if anything will be found. I saw no remnants of clothing, such as metal or buttons which would not decompose as rapidly as flesh. Hm!" He glanced at the trench. "I'd say he was probably buried naked."

"To prevent identification, just in case," McCabe agreed. "But don't tell me you think he was an Indian, with those dentures."

"I'll tell you, in my own way, if you'll stop interrupting," Bigbee said. "No, the structure of the cheekbones is Caucasian, not Indian. Male. No signs of calcification around the joints, arthritis to you, so perhaps he was under middle age. And, pending tests on the skeletal remains, I'd guess he'd been buried there at least thirty years. The type of dentures would

tend to confirm that, also. And look here." He went to the trench and picked up the lower jawbone. "Look at this mandible. It was broken once and the bone was badly set. It reflected in the gum, too, because there's a slight bend in these lower dentures. If you can locate the dentist who made the plates, that deformity should be of assistance in identifying the victim. Hm!" Bigbee guffawed. "Now, Chief, you can get your own teeth into the case."

McCabe carefully wrapped the dentures. Jess Parkinson, who had been standing near with other bystanders, looked dubious.

"He might have come here from way back in the Midwest like I did and had the teeth made there. So how do you expect to find the dentist who—"

That was police work, thought McCabe, moving away. All vague clues had to be traced in the hopes that one of them would lead to a solution. He drove his official station wagon downtown to Main Street and caught one of Valley View's two dentists, redhead young Dr. Collier, just leaving for lunch.

"Doctor," he said, extending the dentures, "as soon as it's convenient I'd like to have a technical description of these for a bulletin to dental associations."

The young dentist examined the plates curiously. "These vulcanized affairs went out just about the time I graduated and took over Dr. Schmidt's practice here. I'll help, of course, but why don't you see him too, if he isn't off fishing. He could tell you more about the style of construction than I could."

McCabe nodded. "Thanks. I'll run out to his place and—"

The loud moan of the fire siren rising to a scream interrupted him. Reluctantly, he pigeonholed the case. A small-town police chief, lacking manpower, had to be and do all things. He'd have to accompany the volunteer firemen to keep spectators out of the way. He arrived at the fire station as the volunteer chief called the location to the rig drivers..

"Maple Grove, three miles north of the highway. Dr. Schmidt's place."

McCabe's jaw tightened. Maybe the case wasn't pigeonholed. Usually he followed the rigs, but this time he rammed his car out ahead with red lights flashing and siren shrilling. He outran the rigs toward black smoke billowing northeast of town. Then he could see the old house, and the flames roaring out of every window from basement to attic. The adjoining barn, with the retired dentist's car, was also an inferno.

Two hours later, grimy and reeking of smoke, McCabe returned to young Dr. Collier's office.

"I won't be mailing out that bulletin. I'm convinced that Dr. Schmidt made those dentures. He's been killed. His home, everything, was saturated with gasoline and completely destroyed by fire."

Dr. Collier was startled. "Then the killer is still here in town. Did anyone see—"

"No," McCabe snapped. "But *I'll* see him, sooner or later." He wiped the sweaty soot from his face. "Doctor, when you took over this practice, what happened to the records of Schmidt's patients?"

"He left them with me. They're stored here."

"Good." McCabe lowered his voice. "I think the killer doesn't know that. So let's be quiet about having the records to search through."

"Of course." Dr. Collier frowned. "But, Mac, there are boxes and boxes, maybe a couple thousand dental charts, all filed alphabetically. Where do I start looking?"

McCabe let his breath out heavily. "And you've got your practice to take care of too. I'll send a man over here to help look, and also to keep an eye open, just in case the killer surmises—"

"Tell him," Dr. Collier said grimly, "to guard the killer if I don't see him first. Dr. Schmidt was a swell old guy. He made it easy for me to start practice."

McCabe drove to the site of the groundbreaking. Knapperman had just finished sifting earth. All he'd found was a misshapen bit of lead.

"It was inside the skull. Looks like it might have been a .22. It's not going to be much help."

"Wash up and get some lunch," McCabe ordered. "Then get over to Dr. Collier's office. Make it fast."

He had a sense of urgency he couldn't hold down. Back in the one-room police headquarters at city hall he sat tensely at his desk. The search through thousands of musty dental records might take much too long. Eventually it might disclose the identity of the skeleton. Meanwhile, townspeople would be trying to recall old unexplained disappearances. If anyone came close, and the unknown killer became aware of it . . .

McCabe's fist thumped the desk. He needed a shortcut of some kind. He reviewed what little he knew about the victim, the skeleton. Male. Age anywhere from about twenty to forty. Had lost all his teeth. Had once had a broken jaw. Had been dead for at least thirty years.

McCabe stared at the calendar, subtracted thirty from the year. That would put the time back around 1940. What was going on then? The beginnings of World War II in Europe. The U.S. hadn't entered yet. The draft here, and war industries booming. But at the groundbreaking this morning, no one had volunteered information about a mysterious disappearance around 1940.

McCabe looked at the calendar again and subtracted forty years. Call it around 1929 and the early 1930s. McCabe hadn't been born yet, but he recalled his parents and grandparents talking about those hard times. The Great Depression. No jobs. Bread lines, soup kitchens. Banks closing. The Midwest Dust Bowl ruining farms and farmers.

Getting up suddenly, he hurried out to his car and drove to Main Street. He entered the office of Verne Warner. The elderly realtor clattered the phone back on its cradle.

"Just been speaking long-distance to Dr. Schmidt's son. He'll be out here tomorrow. It was a terrible shock to him. Terrible for anyone to think of it. A quiet little town like this." Warner's face looked older, haggard and worried as he glanced toward the street windows. "Makes a man wonder which of us old-timers will be next because we might know something. Are you making any headway, Mac?"

"Every clue is headway until it proves otherwise."

He stood before the desk. "Verne, what was it like here about 1930? In the Depression years?"

Warner grimaced in memory. "Grain, produce, and livestock prices down to nothing. Tax sales of farms, stores in town folding because they couldn't get credit or collect on what they'd extended to hard-up folks. What makes you ask? Has it got something to do with this morning?"

"Maybe just a wild guess." McCabe hesitated. "Verne, this morning you defended the Hammonds. I'm not trying to argue you down, but if it might help to know more about them. They were wealthy, weren't they?"

Warner nodded. "Ran a big dairy herd. All Holsteins. Largest producers in the valley."

"And," McCabe suggested, "they didn't feel the pinch of the hard times too much around 1930?"

"Nobody escaped," Warner retorted. "Still, I guess you could say they got off easier than most, and they helped a lot of other people who didn't."

"But even so," McCabe persisted, "wasn't there some resentment because they were better off than most?"

Warner glowered at him. "You're grasping at a straw, Mac. You're trying to say that someone had it in for them, that they killed him and quietly buried him to keep their respected standing in community." Warner lifted his hands and let them drop. "Then again, maybe it isn't so farfetched. Who would know? But it seems hard to believe."

McCabe nodded glumly. "And they could have pled self-defense, unless they didn't care for the publicity," he sighed. "Well, thanks for the help, Verne."

"Was it of any help?" Warner asked wryly.

McCabe left his car and walked down the street to Dr. Collier's office. He winked at a wide-eyed boy clinging to a woman in the waiting room. "It won't be as tough as you think, son." Wishing he could say the same for his own problem, he looked inquiringly at the receptionist, who nodded toward a hallway. He found Knapperman going through a dusty file while the whine of a drill came from a room farther on.

"That thing sets my teeth on edge," Knapperman growled. He slapped a stack of dental charts. "And these give me a headache thinking of all the tooth troubles people have had."

McCabe smiled wanly. "Maybe you'll remember to brush your teeth after every meal." He pointed suddenly. "You didn't even read that chart. Now, look—"

"Mac," Knapperman cut in. "Doc told me to look at the date of the patient's first visit, and if it was within the past twenty-five years to forget it."

"Sorry," McCabe said.

"Accepted, sir." Knapperman grinned, moving aside. "Did you come to help me?"

"I'm looking for help," said McCabe. He took out a pencil and notebook. "You can help me compile a list of every middle-aged and older person we recognized at the groundbreaking. The killer was among them. He had to be close to know we'd found those dentures. That's why he moved in fast on Dr. Schmidt."

It was a fairly long list. It took McCabe the rest of the afternoon to check out the names. Every man he casually interviewed either had not lived there thirty or more years ago or had a valid alibi for the time Dr. Schmidt was killed. That left only women on the list. Sighing, McCabe decided to be thorough, and started the rounds again. Then he learned

that many of the women would be at the Legion Hall preparing for a social that evening.

The ladies at the Hall fluttered about him; wanted to cut him a slice of cake, give him a sandwich, a cup of coffee. He accepted the coffee, but had a difficult time isolating them individually for casual questioning. He got answers similar to those from the men. Either the women hadn't lived here thirty-odd years ago or they'd been in a hospital having a baby or an operation which they wanted to tell him all about. He finally had one unchecked name left, and it was odd that he didn't see her in the hall, for she was an avid clubwoman and party-goer. Then, as he was leaving, she came bustling in.

"Sorry I'm late, girls," cried Agnes Warner, "but I had to put the guest room to rights. Poor Dr. Schmidt's son is going to stay with us tomorrow. Isn't it terrible about his father?"

"Mrs. Warner," McCabe said.

"Oh, hello, Mac. You even look all fagged out. Aren't we all, with what's happened today? I hope you get the scoundrel who—"

"May I talk to you a moment, alone?"

"If you don't mind my filling party favors while—"

"Not at all," said McCabe. He waited with outward patience while she got set up at a table off in a corner. Other women found reasons to hover near. He kept his voice down.

"This morning, Mrs. Warner, you said you knew the Hammonds."

"Oh, yes, Imogene and I grew up together, were just about inseparable despite the differences between our families."

"Differences?" McCabe asked, putting out cardboard cups for her.

"Oh, not what you're thinking, Mac. I mean they were well off while we were just scraping along. But there wasn't anything high and mighty about the Hammonds. When hard times came, they shared with us without making us feel it was charity."

McCabe nodded resignedly. This was just about what her husband had said. The wealthy Hammonds were solid, likeable.

"You also said you were to have been a bridesmaid at Imogene Hammond's wedding. I got the impression it didn't take place."

Mrs. Warner's face clouded as she poured nuts into a cup. "That's right. Imogene was never the same afterwards, sort of withdrew into herself, didn't want to see people, not even me. It wasn't as though she was going to be embarrassed. People wouldn't have known, because the

engagement hadn't even been announced yet. But I happened to know because Imogene and I had been so close up until then."

McCabe kept his voice casual. "Why was it called off?"

"Well . . ." She pursed her lips. "It was hard times, and her father heard that Jack wanted to marry her for the family money."

"Jack who?" McCabe asked tensely.

"Jack Tilliman. He'd known Imogene all his life. Not as though he'd just come here looking for work, like Verne did."

"Did Mr. Hammond question him about his reasons for wanting to marry Imogene? Was there a scene about it?"

Mrs. Warner shook her head. "There wouldn't have been a scene because none of us could believe that about Jack."

"Wouldn't have been a scene?" McCabe repeated. "Wasn't Jack Tilliman questioned?"

"No." Mrs. Warner sighed, pouring nuts. "And I guess there was some truth to it after all. Because he left Valley View and sent Imogene a telegram from Seattle, saying he was sorry, but she could never be happy with him now that she knew the truth. Imogene still couldn't and wouldn't believe it. It broke her heart and she withdrew from everybody. She wouldn't even come out to be bridesmaid at my wedding."

McCabe kept a firm grip on his patience and his thoughts.

"How did Jack's jaw get broken? When did he lose his teeth?"

"It happeed when he was about nineteen. A horse kicked him in the mouth, then infection set in. He had to wear false teeth. And being so young, he was sensitive about it, so it was kept sort of secret and—" Her words stopped. Her mouth and eyes widened. "Good heavens, you don't think those bones found this morning—"

"Mrs. Warner," McCabe cut in quickly, "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention this to anyone else until I'm certain."

He hesitated. "Why did you keep silent at the groundbreaking?"

○ "Because it didn't dawn on me. After all, there had been that telegram from Jack, as though he were alive. Do you really think—"

"I'm not sure about those bones," McCabe said, hoping his face didn't betray the lie. "The possibility just dawned on you now," he murmured. "You had no other thoughts about it before this?"

Her plump pleasant features flushed. "Who hasn't been talking and wondering about the Hammonds and everything that's happened today? I suppose we shouldn't, because we haven't got the facts. I guess I can't

blame Verne for calling me an old gossip when I tried to talk about it when he came in late for lunch. He's really quite upset over all this. It's aged him ten years. He feels strongly about the Hammonds. After he came here looking for work and before we were engaged, we'd often make up a foursome, Jack and Imogene, he and I—"

"And he doesn't want you to talk about it," McCabe said very quietly. "Thanks for the favor, Mrs. Warner."

"But I didn't give you one," she laughed, handing him a cup filled with mixed nuts. His thoughts were very mixed, too, as he carried the cup out to his car.

He drove slowly down Main Street. Warner's real estate office was dark, but there was a light at Dr. Collier's just down the street. McCabe went in. The dentist and Knapperman, amid boxes of dental charts, looked as weary as he felt.

"Try Tilliman—Jack," he said.

Dr. Collier began reading tabs on box fronts. Knapperman found it and hauled off boxes on top. The dentist flipped through cards, then pulled one out and scanned it. "Bull's-eye," he said.

Knapperman sank back on his heels. "Thanks for the shortcut, Mac. Now where do we go from here?"

"Verne Warner's," McCabe said.

"I'll save you the trip," said Verne Warner from the dim hallway.

McCabe turned quickly.

"No, Mac," Warner said heavily, "I know I can't get the three of you." He leaned against the doorjamb. "I've been watching from the office all afternoon and this evening, feeling and knowing you were closing in." He sighed deeply. "I shouldn't have lost my head this morning, should have left well enough alone with Fred Schmidt. All he could have told you was about Jack's teeth. He . . . nobody could have guessed anything else, not with the Hammonds all dead."

"Except possibly one other person," McCabe suggested.

"Agnes," Verne Warner murmured. He shook his head. "She could maybe figure it was Jack you found this morning. But nothing else. Only Imogene could have guessed, and she's gone. I should have remembered all that, shouldn't have lost my head."

"What could Imogene have guessed?" McCabe answered his own question with another. "Were you hoping to marry her?"

Verne Warner closed his eyes. "It was hard times. I was broke, no job

that lasted. Her folks had money. I thought she had a feeling for me, but I guess she was just using me to make sure of herself for Jack, having known him all along. Anyway, he and I had an argument about her . . . got heated . . . we were out hunting rabbits and—”

“You shot him,” McCabe said, “then you removed identification, but didn’t know about the dental plates. You buried him in a Hammond field you knew wasn’t likely to be plowed up.”

“More than thirty years,” the realtor muttered. “I forgot just where I put him until he was dug up this morning. I knew the groundbreaking was close, but I was hoping . . .”

He shook his head again.

“Thirty years and more . . . I guess Imogene never talked about my feelings to Agnes. And afterwards she didn’t have any suspicions to go on, not after that telegram I sent her in Jack’s name from Seattle. Anyway none of it did any good. She stopped seeing me, stopped seeing Agnes, didn’t even come to our wedding. I was always afraid, before Imogene died, that she might take up with Agnes again, and if they put two and two together . . .”

McCabe felt very weary. “I’ve just come from talking to your wife. She still doesn’t suspect.”

“I’ve been hoping she wouldn’t.” Verne Warner looked straight at McCabe. “Could you let it go on that way, Mac?”

“Verne,” McCabe said slowly, “you’ve committed two murders. Maybe I couldn’t do much about Tilliman without your confession.” His voice hardened. “But you’re going to stand trial for killing Dr. Schmidt.”

Dr. Collier nodded grimly.

“No,” Verne Warner mumbled. “Not your kind of trial, Mac. I’ve already stood mine.” Breathing hard, he put his hand to his mid-section and started to collapse.

McCabe caught him, easing him down. “What kind of poison did you take? Knapperman, get Doc Coolidge!”

“No,” Verne Warner said thickly. “Too late for him. But, Mac . . . try . . . for Agnes . . . will you?”

An hour and a half later a consultation ended in Dr. Collier’s crowded office. Besides McCabe, the dentist, and Knapperman, there were the mayor, the medical examiner, and Dr. Coolidge.

“Well,” sighed Mayor Bronson, “you never know about people, do you? Leading citizen, pillar of the church, and—”

"And Agnes," murmured Dr. Coolidge. "Happily married and never suspecting. This is going to be a shock to her."

"Death in any form always is," said McCabe. "We're all agreed, then? It was too much for Verne Warner, helping with the case?"

"Agnes is aware," said the physician, "that I've been urging him to take things easier."

McCabe looked inquiringly at Doc Bigbee, the medical examiner.

"Hm! Well, as far as we're concerned, the two murders are solved. Airing the facts would only result in harm to innocents. So . . . hm . . . all right, I'll go along publicly that the skeletal remains found this morning are beyond identification. And as for Dr. Schmidt—"

McCabe took over. "He was probably filling his gasoline lamp to go on a camping-fishing trip. The fuel ignited, flared up, and he inhaled flame. By the time the fire department got there the place was fully aflame."

Knapperman spoke hesitantly. "We'll be able to keep the real facts quiet, won't we; for the sake of Mrs. Warner?"

Dr. Collier nodded. McCabe gave Knapperman a brief smile.

"Anybody who doesn't keep it quiet may find the case has given *him* some broken teeth."

Setting his own teeth, but not feeling quite so weary, McCabe went out to break the news to Agnes Warner about her husband's fatal heart attack.



The Marrow of Justice

by Hal Ellson

The coffin was a plain one, finished in the shop of Carlos Martinez, without frills, stark naked wood of soft pine. Harsh sunlight splintered off it as the men carried it through the miserable street, treading its dust, stones, and the scattered fire of tangerine peels withering in the heat.

It was a day of flame but, in this land of perpetual sun, not unseasonable. No more than death. The poor in their shacks and crumbling adobes knew its ghastly visits all too frequently. Funerals were commonplace and all of a kind. A plain pine box for the deceased, four men to carry it, and a small group of mourners following.

A vast crowd followed the coffin of Rosa Belmonte, the third young girl in the city to die by violation. Half-starved dogs with their ribs showing, children, toddlers, and beggars amidst the crowd lent it a pseudo air of carnival which was diluted by the somber faces of adults and a muffled silence under which anger awaited eruption.

The police felt it, a news photographer sighted it in his camera. Detective Fiala was aware of the same phenomenon, but unconcerned with the crowd as such. His eyes sought only one man—the murderer who, through guilt or morbid disposition, might be lurking here.

No face riveted his attention till he noticed the limousine, with the crowd breaking around it and the Chief of Police, José Santiago. He was sitting beside his chauffeur, face bloated and dark, tinted glasses concealing incongruous blue eyes that resembled twin stones and reflected the basic nature of the man.

Without the uniform he might be the one I'm looking for, Fiala thought, turning away and moving on with the sullen crowd that refused to acknowledge the naked violence of the sun.

The funeral went off without incident, the police were relieved, Chief Santiago satisfied. His chauffeur returned him to the Municipal building, the location of police headquarters.

As he entered his office with Captain Torres, the phone rang. He picked it up, listened, then dismissed Captain Torres with a wave of his hand. Frowning now, he spoke to his caller, Victor Quevedo, mayor of the city and the one who had "made" him. These two were friends of a sort, but the conversation that ensued between them now was strictly business.

The murder of Rosa Belmonte, with the killer not apprehended, as in both previous murders, had created grave criticism of the police which, in turn, reflected upon Quevedo, exposing him to the machinations of his political enemies. This was the gist of Quevedo's complaint along with his sharp demand that Santiago do something and do it fast.

"Do what?" Santiago said.

"Get the killer before midnight."

Astounded, Santiago hesitated, stuttered inanely, and finally managed to say, "But, Victor—"

Quevedo cut him off sharply. "I am being embarrassed, politically and otherwise," he snapped. "If you wish to continue as Chief of Police, find the killer. Don't, and you're finished."

Sweating profusely, Santiago dropped the phone and sat down. Slowly, with trembling hands, he lit a cigarette and dispersed a cloud of smoke. His thoughts were in chaos, dark face swollen to bursting. Slowly the agitation within him receded. Behind his tinted glasses his cold eyes lit up as a face focused in his mind.

He crushed his cigarette, arose, opened the door, called Captain Torres into the office, and gave him his orders. "Pick up Manuel Domingo for the murder of Rosa Belmonte."

Manuel Domingo's criminal activities were long known to the police—but murder? Captain Torres raised his brows in surprise.

"Are you sure you have the right man?" he asked.

"Are you doubting me, or my source of information?" Santiago wanted to know, asserting both the authority of his office and intimating that the phone call he'd received was the "voice" of a reliable informer.

Captain Torres flushed and retreated to the door. From there he said, "I'll pick up Manuel Domingo personally."

At nine that evening, a black sky threatened the city and the lacy jacarandas stirred to a faint errant wind from the mountains where yellow lightning ignited the empty heavens. Behind the municipal building four bars faced the plaza, loud voices broke from each of them.

Saturday night was just beginning and musicians lolled on the plaza benches, barefoot boys shined shoes, hawked blood-red and dove-white roses on trays of cardboard, like everyone else, forgetting Rosa Belmonte.

It was on this scene that Captain Torres arrived with three of his men after an intensive and fruitless search of all the usual haunts of the criminal Manuel Domingo.

Captain Torres was convinced that Domingo had fled the city when chance directed his eyes to a bench where two shoeshine boys vied for the privilege of doing the shoes of Detective Fiala.

Granting them each a shoe, Fiala looked up to see the strapping, youthful Captain Torres and his three men confronting him.

The latter were innocuous fellows, Captain Torres an arrogant whelp, but hardly that now. He needed help and Fiala, whom he despised and who despised him, might provide the information he needed so badly.

"I am looking for Manuel Domingo," Torres announced. "Perhaps you know his whereabouts?"

With a derisive smile, Fiala nodded toward a bar directly across the street. "Manuel Domingo is in there. You're picking him up?"

"For the murder of Rosa Belmonte," Captain Torres replied and turned on his heels.

Fiala sat where he was. Half a minute later Manuel Domingo came through the door of the bar across the street, accompanied by Captain Torres and his three men. All five passed through the plaza and entered police headquarters.

Fiala, who had gone off duty early that day, lit a cigarette and shook his head. No matter what, Manuel Domingo's fate was sealed, the murder was solved. Tomorrow the newspapers would be filled with it.

In disgust, Fiala flicked his cigarette to the gutter and noticed the group of men who'd come from the bar across the street. Anger echoed in their voices; word spread quickly around the plaza; Manuel Domingo had been picked up for the murder of Rosa Belmonte. Manuel Domingo . . .

Under the black angry sky a crowd began to converge on police headquarters, but too late to give vent to its feelings, for the brief interrogation of Manuel Domingo was already completed. Guarded by police, he stepped to the sidewalk and was quickly ushered into a waiting car.

Into a second car stepped Chief of Police Santiago and Captain Torres. With an escort of ten motorcycle policemen, both cars roared off toward the scene of the crime, in the desert several miles from the city.

The cavalcade soon reached it, the glaring lights of cars and motorcycles focused on a tall yucca beside the road. At its foot Luis Espina, a gatherer of fibre obtained from a small spiny desert plant, had discovered the body of Rosa Belmonte.

As Manuel Domingo stepped from the car, his face took on a ghastly hue, perhaps because of the lights, perhaps out of fear now that he was at the scene of the crime. Whatever he felt, he said nothing; he appeared dazed.

A sharp command from Captain Torres sent the policemen into a wide semi-circle, with guns drawn to prevent an attempted escape. That done, Captain Torres walked to the edge of the road with Santiago and Manuel Domingo. There, on orders, he took up position, while the prisoner and Santiago proceeded to the foot of the yucca.

Once there, Manuel Domingo stopped and stood like a soldier ordered to attention. Headlights impaled him in a glaring crossfire. A sheer wall of black enveloped this luminous area. Now the brief interrogation which Santiago had conducted at headquarters continued. He was seen to gesture; his voice in an unintelligible murmur carried only to Captain Torres.

Manuel Domingo turned, spoke for the first time since stepping into the car. He was frightened, the terrible black sky threatened, he did not trust Santiago.

"Get me out of this," he said, "or else."

"Quiet, you fool. This is routine. You've been accused."

"Who accuses me? Name him."

"Shut up and listen."

Manuel Domingo came to attention again. His chest heaved, chin lifted, then suddenly he bolted in an attempt to escape. Calmly Santiago fired from the hip.

Domingo seemed to be running on air. The weight of his body carried him forward, then his legs buckled and he plunged forward to sprawl on the desert floor.

Moments later Santiago stood over him and fired another shot as the others closed in.

The black night enveloped the desolate scene as the cavalcade roared off toward the city. Santiago glanced at the clock on the dashboard and settled back. It was still early, the issue settled. The mayor no longer had reason to be embarrassed.

As Santiago smiled to himself, Captain Torres turned and said, "Offi-

cially, we know now that Manuel Domingo was guilty of murdering Rosa Belmonte, but—”

“You don’t think he killed the girl?”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“Then why did he run?”

“I told him we couldn’t protect him from the mob, that if he ran, I’d cover him and let him escape because I knew he was innocent.”

“But you shot him down.”

Santiago put a cigarette to his lips. “I had no alternative,” he answered, flicking his lighter, and the cavalcade moved on toward the lights of the city.

In the early morning the body of the murderer Manuel Domingo, naked but for a white sheet that covered the lower half of his body, lay on a long table beneath a tree in a small plaza near the center of the city for all to see and take warning. Flies came with the heat; the light brought crowds.

All through the day the people of the city filed past the dead man and at dusk he was taken away, mourned by none.

Here the matter would have ended, interred along with Manuel Domingo, but for Detective Fiala, who knew one thing beyond doubt: Domingo hadn’t killed the girl. With the murderer still at large, on his own time, Fiala conducted an investigation which quickly proved fruitful. That done, he appeared at the Municipal building, asked to see Mayor Quevedo, and was informed that he was at lunch with several men of importance.

Obtaining the name of the restaurant, Fiala went there, seated himself at a table next to Quevedo’s party, bowed, and, in a voice soft enough to elude the ears of the others, said, “If I may have a word. It’s a matter of grave importance which concerns you.”

Such was his manner that Quevedo quickly nodded. When he and his companions finished eating, he contrived an excuse for remaining behind and sat down at Fiala’s table.

“Now,” he said with some anxiety, “what is this matter of importance which concerns me?”

“I’m afraid it’s much too important to discuss here.”

“In that case, we’ll go to my office.”

Fiala nodded and both of them rose and went out the door. A few

minutes later they faced each other across Quevedo's ornate hand-carved desk. Quevedo offered a cigarette. Fiala refused it and presented his case, bluntly informing him that the Chief of Police had murdered Rosa Belmonte.

"A very serious charge," Quevedo said, turning pale. "But can you prove it?"

Fiala nodded and described how he'd gone to see Luis Espina, the fibre-gatherer who'd discovered the body of the dead girl. With a series of tactful questions he'd finally gotten the old man to admit that he'd actually witnessed the murder.

"If this is true," Quevedo put in, "why didn't Espina come forward and say so?"

"He couldn't," Fiala replied, "because at the time of the murder he didn't recognize Santiago. All he knew was that the killer drove off in a blue and white Cadillac. That was significant. I continued to question him and he produced a vivid description of the driver, but not his identity. That came later when I pressed him."

"He then admitted that he'd watched the spectacle last night. The lights drew him from his house, and he saw Santiago gun down Manuel Domingo. That's when he recognized him as the murderer of Rosa Belmonte."

Quevedo nodded and said, "The word of a confused old man. His story won't hold water. Besides, Domingo admitted his guilt at the scene of the crime by attempting to escape."

"Admitted his guilt?" Fiala smiled and shook his head. "That was the one fact I knew from the beginning, that he wasn't guilty. You see, Manuel Domingo couldn't have killed Rosa Belmonte. He wasn't in the city that day. I know. I trailed him to San Rafael with the expectation of catching him in one of his activities, dealing in marijuana."

"He remained at a bar in San Rafael till evening, and his contact never appeared. Perhaps he knew I'd trailed him. At any rate, the deal didn't come off. At nine he headed back to the city. By that time Rosa Belmonte was dead."

At this point Quevedo was convinced of the truth of Fiala's charge, but one thing was unclear. "Why did Santiago pick Domingo for a victim?" he wanted to know.

Fiala smiled again and clarified the point. "One," he said, holding up a finger. "Domingo's reputation was bad; the charge appeared to suit his

character. Two: Santiago and Domingo were partners. Domingo controlled the red-light district, with the help of Santiago. They quarreled over money. Santiago claimed that Domingo was holding out on him. He probably was, so Santiago found it doubly convenient to eliminate him."

Quevedo nodded. It was all clear now, too clear. He frowned and his face paled. If revealed, Santiago's terrible act would threaten his own position. Frightened, his eyes met Fiala's.

The detective had read his thoughts and understood his predicament. "Of course, Santiago should be brought to justice," he said, "but to arrest him would be embarrassing to you."

Badly shaken, Quevedo nodded, but he was still alert. Fiala's statement implied more than it said.

"What do you suggest?" Quevedo asked.

Fiala moistened his lower lip with his tongue. "Speak to Santiago," he answered. "Give him the facts."

"And if he denies them?"

"If he does, tell him he'll be placed under arrest. After that has taken place—" Here Fiala shrugged. "You cannot guarantee his safety from the mob. I think he'll understand."

"Understand what?"

"Call him and see."

Quevedo glanced at the phone and hesitated, giving Fiala the opportunity to rise from his chair. "I'm going for coffee. I'll be back," he said, and left Quevedo to deliver his terrible message.

Ten minutes later he returned to the mayor's office. Quevedo was still troubled. He said nothing. Fiala sat and reached for his cigarettes. At that moment the phone rang. Quevedo picked up the instrument, listened briefly, then placed the phone back on its cradle.

"Santiago just shot himself," he announced.

Having foreseen this, Fiala merely shrugged and said, "But of course. He had no alternative."

At this point, Quevedo saw Fiala in a new light. The fellow was devilishly clever and had saved him from his enemies. "I am in your debt," he said.

"Not at all," replied Fiala.

"Ah, but I am," Quevedo insisted. "Besides, I have no Police Chief now. Would you consider the office?"

Fiala grinned and, to the consternation of Quevedo, shook his head.

"But why not?" said Quevedo. "I don't understand. Think of what it means to be Chief of Police."

"In this city," Fiala replied, "it means to have much power, and power corrupts."

"It would corrupt you?" Quevedo asked.

"I'm made of flesh and blood. Perhaps it might, but I doubt it."

"Then why refuse?"

"Because the job doesn't interest me. It's as simple as that," Fiala answered, and rose from his chair to light a cigarette. With that, he walked to the door.

Still puzzled, Quevedo watched him, then said, "But you must want something. What do I owe you?"

His hand on the doorknob, Fiala turned. "Nothing," he answered. "Just be more careful when you pick the new Chief of Police."



Favor

by Stephen Wasylyk

"Listen, Mr. Stoneman," the voice said, "I hear someone is paying big money to take care of a guy named Scott who works at the airfield. You told me once he was a friend of yours, right?"

My doodling fingers started to sketch a skull and crossbones on my note pad. Unlikely as it was that anyone would want to kill Scott, the gasping, pitch-changing, sniff-punctuated voice was never known to be wrong. "Tell me who, Snuffles," I said.

"Don't know. I owe you a favor. I'm paying. That's it. You take it from here, man." The phone went dead.

I leaned back in my chair, nerves in my stomach knotted into a tight ball. Indian summer had come to the city, the sun turning the perpetual haze to a warm golden mist and until Snuffles called, it had been a leisurely, enjoyable day. Now I had to move and move fast, and I felt like a blind man dropped suddenly into an unfamiliar room.

A pigeon chandelled to my window sill, cocked its head at me for a few seconds, decided a worried looking, stony-faced, middle-aged attorney wasn't the type for a handout and tumbled from the sill with wings spread. I watched it wheel gracefully down.

Twenty-two years before on a similar hazy sunny afternoon, I had wheeled down as gracefully and stupidly as that pigeon, and George Scott had blown an ME-109 off the tail of my fighter, a debt I never had a chance to repay. If Snuffles Grogan owed me a favor for keeping him out of jail, I sure as hell owed one to Scott for something far more important.

I punched the button on my private outside line and dialed Scott Flying at the municipal airfield.

Scott's voice was amused. "The operator says you're John Stoneman, but I don't believe her. Used to know a John Stoneman, but haven't talked to him for at least a year. I think an irate husband shot him."

"The woman you married doesn't want her husband associated with

a disreputable bachelor," I reminded him. The skull and crossbones on my note pad stared up at me. "How are things there, Scott? Anything new?"

"Hell, no. Same routine day in, day out. If the weather is good we fly. If it isn't we go home and I worry about how much money I'm losing."

"Nothing unusual there at all?"

"What do you call unusual?" Scott's voice was puzzled.

"Anything happen in the last week that never happened before?"

"Yeah," he said. "Some idiot wanted to buy me out. Fat chance. I've spent twenty years building this thing and now that it's clear, I can sit back and enjoy it without working hard."

"Who wants to buy?"

"Don't know. The offer was made through a lawyer named C. J. Matthews, a fat little bald head with shifty eyes."

"I know the one you mean! Anything else unusual?"

"I made a profit last week even though the weather was bad."

"Don't go away. I'll be back to you."

"Hey, wait a minute," he yelled. "You can't call me once a year, ask a lot of fool questions and hang up!"

"Sure I can," I told him. "Listen." I broke the connection and buzzed for my secretary.

"Get an attorney named C. J. Matthews on the phone for me," I told her.

I sat back to think. Scott was an easy-going, popular man, a war hero rewarded by the city a long time ago with a long-term lease for operating his flying service at the city's airfield, a hard working, somber citizen who made as unlikely a candidate for a killing as anyone I knew.

My phone buzzed and I introduced myself to Matthews as Scott's attorney. He wasn't at liberty to reveal the name of the client interested in Scott Flying and the offer was no longer open. I mentally scored one for Stoneman, knowing a legitimate offer would never have been withdrawn so quickly.

The desk clock crept past three-thirty. Pushing my chair back, I headed for the office next to mine.

Matthews couldn't tell me who his client was but there was nothing to prevent me from finding out on my own.

I knocked gently and opened the door. The old gentleman had spun around to face the window and the warm sun, slid down a little in his

chair, folded his hands across his stomach and fallen asleep. I tapped his shoulder.

One eye opened. "You cannot prove beyond a reasonable doubt I was asleep."

"I can make a rather strong case."

His name was Martin Chetkos and he had taken me direct from law school and taught me everything he knew about criminal law, which was considerable. As a reward for my learning well, he had made me his partner and let me do all the work while he rested his seventy year old bones in his soft leather chair and criticized.

"C. J. Matthews of Matthews, Crane, etcetera, etcetera," I said. "Blame him for it. Big man?"

"Big man."

"Client would have to be important for him personally to approach a friend of mine with an offer to buy his business, right?"

His eyes narrowed, flickering with interest. "It would be reasonable to suppose it would be the firm's most important client, a man named Bessinger. He tried to buy your friend's business?"

"That's the assumption." I told him about Snuffles Grogan's phone call and my conversation with Scott.

He straightened and rubbed his nose, an automatic gesture when he was pleased or excited. "I believe your assumption is valid. Get your hat. My man shall drive us. I refuse to ride in that wire-wheeled, uncomfortable, flamboyant foreign atrocity you call an automobile."

"Where are we going?"

"To see Scott. I believe he is in trouble but, since he's your friend, he probably won't listen to you. He will listen to me, and I refuse to tell the same story twice."

During the half hour ride he sat with a ghost of a smile on his face, once murmuring something that sounded like everything comes to him who waits.

In Scott's office, Chetkos was almost rude, taking over Scott's chair, brushing conversation aside, hands clasped on his cane, fingers drumming restlessly. He motioned to me. "Tell Mr. Scott why we're here."

I told him. Scott laughed.

Chetkos held up a wrinkled finger. "Do not laugh, Mr. Scott. Mr. Stoneman's source is reliable. Someone intends to kill you. Have you ever met Mr. Bessinger?"

Scott shook his head.

"Think, Mr. Scott. Bessinger is a very short man with straight black hair, close-set black eyes, a high-pitched voice and looks your age although he is twenty years older. He always wears dark grey clothing."

Scott snapped his fingers. "The little guy last week." He looked at me. "Remember I told you the weather was bad? It was closed in so tight one morning nothing was moving, but he wanted me to fly him someplace. I tried to explain I couldn't even find the end of the runway, but I might as well have been talking to the wall. He kept telling me to name my own price."

"What did you say to him, Mr. Scott?" Chetkos sounded as if he knew the answer.

"What could I say? I told him he was insane."

Chetkos let out a long sigh. "I knew it had to be something like that. Let me tell you about Bessinger, Mr. Scott. The Bessinger family has a long history of mental illness. His father was committed to a sanitarium and his mother killed herself while he was still a young boy. He grew up being called Crazy Bessinger. One day he fought with and killed another boy who called him that. It was listed as accidental manslaughter. Twenty years ago his wife died under circumstances never fully explained."

The Indian summer day was almost gone, clouds blotting the sun and through the office window it suddenly looked cold.

"There have been many stories through the years," the old man went on quietly. "Unsubstantiated, of course. I will tell you one, since the situation is similar. Bessinger and I once belonged to the same club. One night in a heated political discussion, a man called Bessinger 'insane.' Within a few days, he received an offer to buy his company. It was so attractive he couldn't refuse, but he never collected the full amount agreed upon. It developed Bessinger was the buyer. He simply refused to pay, forcing the man to take him to court, which was what Bessinger wanted. He could afford to tie him up in litigation for years and he did. Five years later the man finally won the judgment. The next night he was killed by a holdup man as he walked across a parking lot."

"Are you telling me that this man goes around killing people who call him insane?" Scott was skeptical.

"I am telling you that things happen to people who call Bessinger insane."

"How can he get away with it?"

"Planning and money," said Chetkos. "Mr. Stoneman will tell you there is a huge gap between suspicion and proof."

"Oh, come on, Mr. Chetkos. If what you say is true, he'd be responsible for a great many murders. I find that hard to believe."

"I did not say it was necessary for Bessinger to kill these people," said Chetkos. "Many times I am sure he was content with merely ruining them. But even if he had killed them, it shouldn't amaze you. You read the newspapers. You know there have been instances where a person with no apparent reason kills six or eight or twelve innocent people. Is Bessinger so much different?"

Scott shook his head.

"I still can't believe it."

"Take your case, Mr. Scott. We believe Bessinger intends to have you killed, yet he has voiced no overt threat, performed no overt act to make you even suspect him. Suppose an accident happened to you. Who would connect it with a man you spoke to for only a few minutes, a man whose name you didn't even know?"

Scott said nothing.

"You see?" Chetkos asked gently. "Now you believe me."

"What do I do? Call him and apologize? Call the police?"

"Neither. An apology would be ignored and in any event, the wheel has been set in motion. The police can't help because no crime has been committed."

"The man ought to be put away," Scott muttered.

"For forty years, Mr. Scott, I and a few others have been looking for someone to provide the reason and to sign the papers."

"So I walk around like a tin duck in a shooting gallery waiting for someone to knock me off," Scott said quietly.

Chetkos turned to me. "I assume your analytical brain has been functioning?"

"To some extent," I said. "First, if Bessinger has hired someone, the chances are he has stipulated it must look like an accident. He wouldn't want an out and out killing and investigation. Second, even though it would be logical to cause Scott to crash while flying, there are three big things against it. He'd need a specialist, the FAA would become involved, and most certainly the city would take an interest because Scott operates from city property. I think we can rule out anything happening around

here or connected with flying as being too dangerous for Bessinger. Third, the other fixed base from which Scott operates and where he can be found is his home. I don't think the prospective killer will have either the time or the inclination to chase Scott around waiting for an opportunity. Therefore, I would say that he will go after him in his own house. Fourth, a logical projection would be that he will try soon since there is no point in waiting. Perhaps even tonight." I paused for breath. "Would you consider that a penetrating analysis?"

"Superficial at best," said Chetkos. "I personally do not think it will be tonight. Such haste is not characteristic of Bessinger."

He rose to his feet. "I see no reason for my continued presence. I suggest Mr. Stoneman stay with you tonight, Mr. Scott. He will take whatever precautions are necessary. Tomorrow we will arrange for more professional protection." He turned to me. "I hoped the opportunity to stop Bessinger would come while I was young enough to take advantage of it, but you will have to substitute. Trust no one. Bessinger has not survived so long by being indifferent or stupid."

I walked with him to his car. The old man looked tired, the lines drawn tight on his seamed face.

"Suppose we use the same plan we developed under similar circumstances last year, if we need it," I said. "You'll arrange for my gun to be sent to Scott's house? I'm getting too old for this sort of thing. I'll need some solid support."

The old eyes probed at me. "Are you certain you can handle it? While you do have a talent for violence, I would not wish to use it to satisfy my own desire to trap Bessinger. We can take Mr. Scott to my place tonight and arrange for a bodyguard tomorrow."

I thought of the old debt I owed Scott. "I'm doing this for myself. If it were anyone but Scott, the law firm of Chetkos and Stoneman would behave like a law firm, instead of amateur detectives."

He snorted. "Amateurs, indeed. I would not like to think that any venture with which I am associated is tinged with amateurism."

I watched him go. Overhead, a sleek, twin engine plane drifted down the approach, hit the short alternate runway smoothly, slowed, taxied toward Scott Flying, swung neatly into line and Scott's son stepped out, evidently coming home from a charter flight.

A half-dozen people leaned against the wire fence in the gathering dusk, watching the planes. One of them looked at me, turned from the

fence, walked to a car and pulled away. Something was vaguely familiar in the way he moved.

I was still trying to place him when I walked into Scott's office.

"You know, we're lucky," Scott said.

"That's an ironic statement if I ever heard one."

"Carol is out of town for a few days. Be back tomorrow evening."

"That makes things easier," I said. "All we need would be your wife asking questions."

A tall twenty-year-old came through the door.

Scott waved at him. "You remember my son Bill."

I held out my hand. "The last time I saw him he was about fifteen and a lot smaller."

"Mr. Stoneman," the kid said quietly. His grip was perfunctory, his eyes cold, his opinion of me probably taken from his mother.

"I'm taking off," he said to his father. "Angie and I have a date and I won't be home afterward. I'll be staying at her house so I won't have that long drive home."

"Okay with me," said Scott. "Need any money?"

A shadow passed over the kid's face. "No," he said shortly. "I'll see you in the morning."

I made sure he was gone before I said, "You're having trouble with him."

Scott nodded. "Ever since this girl Angie and a couple of her friends hired a plane to go back to college last spring, she's been leading him around by the nose."

"You sound as if you don't like her."

"I don't," he said slowly. "I'm not exactly poor but alongside her father I feel poverty stricken. The kid is out of his class. He was draining me dry trying to keep up with her and I had to put my foot down. I tried to tell him if she was any kind of a woman, she'd spend less of his money. But he doesn't see it that way, so naturally I'm the tight-fisted heavy in the case. Now what's the next step? A professional killer is supposedly after me and I have a lawyer for a bodyguard. What do you intend to do, throw law books at him?"

"You never know," I grinned. "That's what it might come down to. Let's have dinner and go home."

We carefully locked up Scott's house, closing the blinds and the drapes, leaving one window in a first floor bedroom unlatched. I wanted anyone

trying to get in to use that window because I'd rigged it with a homemade burglar alarm; some thumbtacks and a long piece of string running to a sheet of paper on the floor in Scott's den. If the window went up, the paper would move and Scott and I could get there faster than anyone could crawl in.

Chetkos' chauffeur had delivered a package, a short barreled .44 Magnum from my collection. Scott stared at it.

"Why do you need that cannon?"

"Intimidation." I checked it and carefully lowered the hammer on an empty chamber. "A friend on the force once told me there were two weapons an experienced man would never challenge at close range: a sawed off shotgun because it is almost impossible to miss with one, and a heavy handgun because if you are only nicked, you get knocked off your feet. Anytime you fire this, you're playing for keeps. I hope I don't have to use it."

We filled the hours with talk of the days when we flew together and the years since, the talk tapering off when the clock passed midnight. Too little sleep the night before dragged my lids shut and I hovered just under wakefulness, blind but not deaf, hearing familiar sounds, friendly sounds, none bringing the gut-wrenching quiver that would tell me someone was trying to break in. Scott slumped at the desk, staring at the paper, his regular hours as a married man making him more durable. I slipped a notch deeper into sleep, into a half dream world where I watched Scott, Chetkos and myself acting out our parts, where Scott refused to believe any of it and I yelled at him that Chetkos knew what he was doing and twenty years' practice of criminal law had taught me people like Bessinger could exist, that they thought nothing of hiring someone like Deeker Jensen.

I snapped awake, bringing the name out of the dream with me, knowing now why the man I had seen leaning against the fence at Scott Flying that afternoon looked familiar.

Deeker Jensen. I had seen him once, pointed out in a downtown bar; a name for hire, an expensive professional perfect for someone like Bessinger.

There was no sensible reason for Deeker Jensen to be at that fence, except to get a line on Scott. I dialed Chetkos and told him.

"I shall keep Mr. Jensen in mind if anything happens to you," he said.

"You'd better do more than that," I told him.

Scott motioned frantically, pointing at the sheet of paper moving slowly across the floor.

"Here we go," I said softly. "Are you ready?"

I heard a click as Chetkos turned on his tape recorder. "Go ahead," he said.

I placed the receiver down without hanging up and motioned Scott across the heavy rugs to the bedroom window. If Scott had any doubts left, they were gone now, belief accented by the hard lines in his face, dim in the light filtering into the bedroom. We heard the window sliding upward and the soft clicking as the blind followed. A cat yowled suddenly in the quiet night, a baby-in-pain scream that froze my blood and made my heart stutter, and I damned all cats born since the beginning of time.

The drape bulged as someone pulled himself through. Gauging where the head should be, I smashed down with the Magnum and tore the drape aside, gun lifted to smash down again if I had to. The night air rushed in, cool against my clammy face. He was draped across the sill, unmoving. I grabbed his collar and lifted.

Even in the dim light, it wasn't hard to recognize Bill Scott.

Scott cut loose with a few choice words as I helped him carry the kid into the den and drop him into a soft chair.

"You could have killed him," Scott said angrily.

I shook my head. "Not through that drape, but if he makes a habit of climbing through windows, he will get killed."

I was standing behind the chair when the kid stirred, looked up at his father and cursed. "You old fool! Just because I forgot my keys, did you have to brain me?"

If he had been my son, I'd have promptly brained him again.

"Not him," I said. "Me."

The kid spun around, held his head and groaned. He jerked a thumb at me. "What's he doing here, hitting people like that?"

Scott looked at me questioningly. I shook my head.

"We were just talking about old times," I said. "Heard someone sneaking in the window and took no chances. How were we to know it was you? You weren't supposed to be home tonight, remember? Why are you here?"

"If it's any business of yours, Angie and I had an argument so I decided not to stay there. Anything wrong with that?"

"You feel all right, son?" Scott asked gently.

"Except for a headache," he snapped. "I'm getting myself a drink." He headed for the liquor cabinet.

"A drink will make that headache worse," I told him.

"You shut the hell up, Stoneman! You have no business being here!" If he had looked at me with disdain this afternoon, he glared at me now with hate.

"Why not?" I asked mildly. "What difference should it make to you?"

He turned quickly, a long barreled revolver fitted with a silencer in his hand. "This difference. Now I'll have to kill you, too."

Scott, the blood gone from his face, eyes dark, stared at his son, and I'd have given everything I owned to change things, to have had Deeker Jensen crawl in that window.

"Easy, kid," I said softly. "Sons like you don't run around killing their fathers. Would you mind telling him why the thought even entered your head? You owe him that much."

The kid's eyes shifted, perspiration pouring down his face. Living with the thought had made him believe it would be easy; finding both of us here had thrown him off stride.

"Money? Is that it?" I threw the words at him gently. It wouldn't take much to set him off.

"Yeah, money," he said hoarsely. "His will leaves the business to me. I sell it. It's that simple."

"Not easy to sell a business like that."

"I already have a buyer."

"Take it from a lawyer, kid. You have nothing unless it's on paper and signed."

"I have the man's word."

"You have nothing," I said flatly. "Going to take him to court if he backs out? Say you killed your father because the man promised to buy the business from you and then didn't?"

"No reason for him to back out," the kid said contemptuously. "He could buy Scott Flying out of petty cash."

I had to pry the name out of the kid somehow and at this pace we could go on all night.

"Forget it, Bill," I told him. "You're not killing anyone."

The kid grinned tightly. "I still have this gun."

"Don't move, kid," I said wearily. "Just look down alongside this chair. You'll see a .44 Magnum pointed at your belt buckle and if you look real

close you'll see I have the trigger pulled up and the hammer held back. If your finger twitches, my thumb slips off the hammer and you get it. There's no way to beat me, and this gun will remove a healthy part of your anatomy no matter where you get hit."

"You could miss," he said shakily.

"Not likely, but if I do, that open phone line is going to hang you."

The kid's eyes widened when he saw the phone off the hook.

"Use your head," I said. "The idea was to kill your father, make it look like a burglary, discover the body in the morning, and back it all up with the fake alibi that you were at your girl friend's house—if you were capable of doing it, which I doubt. It's all down the drain, so drop it."

Scott hadn't moved, the shock still pinning him to the floor. The muscles played along the kid's jaw for a moment and I let my thumb slip a little, then his shoulders slumped and he let the gun fall.

I took a deep breath and gently lowered the hammer and released the trigger.

"You really didn't want to kill him," I said gently. "It takes more than money for someone like you. It takes passion or hate or anger and you don't have enough of any of them. The girl is pulling at you from one side and twenty years is pulling at you from the other. If you really want money that badly, you know damn well he'd sell the business and give you every penny. You've been enough of a fool for one night so tell me whose idea it was in the first place."

There was a long silence.

"Bessinger," he said finally.

I walked over and picked up the phone. "You get it?" I asked Chetkos.

"Every word, but it isn't much good. Any boy who would consider killing his father obviously needs a psychiatrist, so no jury is going to take his word against a pillar of the community like Bessinger. How did you know it was the boy?"

"I bashed the kid in the head while he was climbing in the window. When we carried him in here, I felt the gun."

"Fantastic," he said. "Bessinger has an uncanny talent for choosing the right man. How do you think Jensen fits in?"

"Coincidence, I guess..."

"Don't be too sure. He just might have hired Jensen in the event the boy couldn't go through with it."

I looked across the room. Scott had retreated behind the desk and was

lighting a cigarette with shaking hands. The kid hadn't moved. I had the feeling he didn't even know where he was.

"I'm going to leave these two to work out their own problems, if it's all right with you. Scott's going to need a doctor for the kid and I'd just be in the way."

"My only concern now is Jensen."

I sighed. "O.K. If I can stay awake long enough, I'll look around outside just to please you."

"Excellent. While you are not the greatest attorney in the world, you would have made quite an adequate police officer."

I grinned, told him to hang on, unlocked the back door, let my eyes become accustomed to the night and started pussyfooting around the house, feeling ridiculous. When I told Chetkos I was getting too old for this sort of thing, I wasn't joking. Fighting with words was a great deal easier and much less dangerous. I paused at the corner. Starlight was enough to show the curved walk leading to the street, the symmetry of the shrubbery on either side broken by an indefinite dark shape some thirty feet away. I crouched, braced the Magnum against the house, sighted in as well as I could on the shape and cautiously called, "Jensen?"

The shape moved, a yellow finger poked at me and a slug ricocheted off the stone house above my head.

I hesitated. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was cut loose with that Magnum in that residential neighborhood. If I missed, there was no telling where that slug would end up.

Jensen solved my problem for me. Another slug whispered over my head, a few inches lower this time. I groaned and he moved forward to finish the job. I pressed closer against the wall, let him get half the distance, and called softly, "That's far enough."

He dropped, fired again, rolled, came up in a crouch and I fired. The Magnum went off with a deep *whoom*, the slug straightening him up and driving him off his feet, and from the way he fell, there was no point in rushing to look him over.

I came to my feet slowly, feeling sick, remembering now: Jensen had left the airfield after young Scott had stepped from the airplane; after seeing the man he'd come to see. So far as I knew, Scott himself had never left the office.

I brushed by Scott at the door and told Chetkos.

"Both of them," I said savagely. "He was going to kill them both. We

thought Grogan was talking about Scott but he was really talking about his son. Do you realize how that madman set this up? If the kid killed Scott, and Jensen killed the kid, that would be ideal. If the boy didn't go through with it, Bessinger would still have punished Scott by having Jensen kill his son. He couldn't lose."

"But he did lose," said Chetkos gently. "Scott and the boy are still alive."

"The hell he did," I snapped. "They still have to live with the knowledge the boy just might have killed his father. You call that losing?"

Chetkos sighed. "Perhaps not. You had better hang up. The police will be there any moment, and you will need my presence to back up your story. I shall be there shortly."

I cradled the phone, feeling the shock and the pain still showing in Scott's face, wondering if I'd really done him a favor by saving his life; and knowing I'd never be content until I caught up to Bessinger, one way or another.



That Year's Victim

by Jack Ritchie

"We would like to murder you," Freddie Thompson said.

I hadn't expected the honor and I was flattered. However, I went through the motions of resisting. "I really don't know whether I can spare the time."

"It won't take but a few moments of your time, Professor."

Professor Harding and I had been engaged in a game of chess when Freddie had knocked at the door of my rooms on faculty row. He represented the committee appointed to arrange the murder.

Harding lit his pipe. "What weapon do you intend using on Professor Ranier?"

"Most of us would have preferred to cut his throat," Freddie said. "But then we remembered that a knife was used to dispose of Professor Elbert last year and we don't like to be repetitious. We finally decided that a revolver would do nicely."

"And just when am I going to be murdered, Freddie?" I asked.

Freddie wore heavy glasses and his penetrating eyes were almost as large as the lenses. "Some time in the near future, Professor. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day. We prefer the actual moment to come as a surprise to you. We feel that if you knew in advance, you might be tempted to—shall we say—ham it up?"

"I would do no such thing," I said stiffly.

"Nevertheless," Freddie said, "we prefer that it be a surprise."

Every year the senior law class at our university stages a mock murder and a mock trial. The murder is usually committed in the presence of as many startled and unsuspecting witnesses as possible—the principle of that being to show the law students, through the trial, that the testimony of eye witnesses is often more than unreliable.

Last year, for instance, Professor Elbert was "stabbed" as classes were changing in the Physical Education building.

The assailant—as usual, it seems—made his physical escape, but was later “arrested” and brought to trial. The incident was witnessed by twenty-eight students and three faculty members. There were not exactly thirty-one different descriptions of the murderer, but suffice it to say that the defendant was found not guilty.

“Who has been selected to murder me?”

Freddie smiled again. “We haven’t made a final decision. But there are any number of volunteers.”

“Shall I carry a plastic bag of tomato juice and crush it to my chest when I am shot?”

“No. We’ve decided that that will not be necessary this year.”

I thought I saw why. When Professor Elbert had expired in his tomato juice gore, the baton twirling team had been in the corridor on the way to the gymnasium. Seven of the girls had fainted. And so had Tanker Flanagan, our star fullback.

I smiled: “Then I will have to resort to sheer acting.”

“We think that everything will come quite naturally,” Freddie said. He looked at Harding. “No one but the committee and the victim must know. You will keep this a secret?”

“I won’t breathe a word,” Harding said.

When Freddie was gone, Harding and I returned to our game.

Harding pondered his king’s side attack. “Freddie Thompson? One of the most brilliant students this university has ever had.”

I nodded. “Almost a straight-A student.”

“Almost?”

“Yes. Through pre-law and law, he’s received only one B.”

“Really? Who gave it to him?”

“I did.”

Harding moved his knight. “A pity to spoil his record.” He tapped the ashes from his pipe. “They’ll have to shoot you in the body, of course. Not the head.”

“Why?”

“There are some types of blanks which expel a cardboard wad with considerable force. The chest would be the safest place to aim the gun.”

“They will undoubtedly use a blank which does not expel a wad.”

Harding was doubtful. “I don’t think so. You see, they want that genuine expression of surprise on your face when the gun is fired. The impact of the wad should do it.”

Somehow the idea of being impacted by a wad made me faintly uneasy. I moved my rook and immediately regretted it.

Harding took a pivotal pawn. "Who else is on the murder committee this year, do you know?"

I could remember only one other student at the moment. "Roy Wickens."

"Tall fellow? Had to put in an extra semester because he failed one of his courses?"

"He couldn't seem to grasp real-estate law. I was forced to give him the grade I did."

"You're rather harsh with your marks, aren't you, Alfred?"

"I do not believe in coddling students. After all, this *is* a university, not a nursery school."

Harding won that game and the next. He almost never wins two in the same evening, but my mind seemed to wander at times.

At ten-thirty, we quit and I saw him to the door.

He adjusted his muffler. "You know, Alfred, I've heard it said that the safest place to commit murder is in Grand Central Station during the rush hour. I imagine a crowded college campus might be a good second choice."

After he left, I read for awhile and then went to bed.

... I was descending the steps of the library. It was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day. Down below me at least a hundred students were gathered in sundry small groups—the girls busy at their primary motive for attending a university, to get a husband.

And suddenly a wild-haired youth wearing glasses dashed up the steps toward me. There was a snarl on his lips and mania in his eyes. He pointed a tremendous revolver directly at my chest.

There was a blinding flash! . . .

I sat up in bed, waiting for the pounding of my heart to become inaudible. After a minute or two, I forced a smile. The subconscious has a perfidious imagination.

It was perhaps three before I dozed off again.

This time I dreamed of a well-attended burial in which I was the principal attraction.

I returned hastily to the conscious and switched on the lights. It was

only four in the morning, but the kind of sleep I was getting was not designed to rejuvenate tired tissues.

I put on my robe and went into the study. I sat down to read, but inevitably found myself at the stack of student papers I would have to grade and return by Friday.

James Branner's theme elicited a sigh. How had he survived college English, much less become an exalted senior in law school? He clearly deserved a C, and even that was charity, in my opinion.

I went on to the next paper, but my thoughts remained with Branner. Wasn't he on the murder committee too?

Branner was a large boy, huge actually. And hadn't he once been placed on university probation, for an entire semester, for participating in one of those homecoming riots?

There was no telling what an unstable personality like that might do next. I crossed out the C and gave him a B.

I worked until seven-thirty and then went out to breakfast. I arrived at the law building twenty minutes before my first class and went to the faculty lounge.

Professor Lasson, reading a newspaper in a high-backed easy chair, was the only other person in the room.

I nodded, took a seat at the opposite end of the room, and lit my pipe.

Ever since I quashed his attempt to make one of his books a required text, Professor Lasson and I have nothing but cold nods for each other.

If he had succeeded in introducing that miserable volume into a university with the prestige that ours has, ninety percent of the law schools in the country would undoubtedly have followed suit.

The financial loss to him was, of course, considerable. As a consequence, the expression Lasson reserved for me was quite as hostile as that on the face of a druggist, when you purchase nothing but a four-cent stamp.

But this time Lasson spoke. "How do you like being this year's murder victim?"

I frowned. "I was always under the impression that the identity of the victim was a secret to all but the murder committee."

The tips of his sharp teeth showed. "A secret to other people, perhaps, but not to me."

"Why not?"

"Because I am the custodian of the gun."

Perhaps it was the lighting of the room, but I had the impression that his eyes were slowly acquiring a malignant quality.

"Naturally, we cannot allow students to carry or possess weapons on the campus," Lasson said. "And so I have possession of the gun—until such time as it is needed."

A thought touched my mind. Did it have to be a student? To commit the murder? I quickly corrected that. To commit the *mock* murder?

I remembered that in 1957, Professor Jacobson had been bashed on the head by Assistant Professor Mabel Watkins while he was lecturing his class on marriage law. The severity of her blow had generally been attributed to nervousness, but I also remember that two weeks previously Jacobson had broken their six-year engagement. He took sick leave for a week.

Lasson reached into his pocket and brought out a revolver.

I closed my eyes.

"This is the weapon," he said.

I opened my eyes again. And I thought, did they have to choose such a large gun?

"A Magnum .38," Lasson said. "One shot will ruin the engine block of a car."

Why should that be of interest to anyone?

He reached into his pocket again: "These are the blanks."

I was gratified to see that the cartridges had no noses.

His hand went into the opposite pocket. "And these are the real thing. Beauties, aren't they?"

That depended on one's taste. "The ones people use to ruin engine blocks?" I asked.

He nodded. "Naturally we wouldn't want to get them mixed up with the blanks."

I was the last one prepared to debate that. "If you aren't aware of it," I said stiffly, "you are pointing that revolver at me."

He chuckled. "It isn't loaded."

I perspired slightly. Suppose he actually wanted to...

But, that was ridiculous. Just because his miserable book was rejected...

My wits returned. The basis of this whole thing—this murder—this *mock* murder—was that there had to be a great many witnesses.

As long as we were alone, I was perfectly safe:

Lasson put the revolver and the cartridges back into his pockets. All except one of the authentic ones. He studied it thoughtfully. "I wonder," he said, "if a bullet-proof vest could stop one of these."

"I decided it was time for me to go to my first class.

As usual, Freddie Thompson occupied one of the front seats—ever alert and prepared for any question. Roy Wickens was near the windows. He came to the university daily, only for this one make-up class.

James Branner, his brow low enough to suggest the Neanderthal rather than the Cro-Magnon, doodled in his notebook with the stub of a pencil. He seemed to be brooding.

And Emmeline Grogan.

Why is it necessary for women students to feel that their education is a failure unless they become infatuated with one of their instructors?

The course and degree of her adoration had followed the usual seating pattern. At the beginning of the semester, she had found the last row quite comfortable. But as the weeks passed, she had gradually worked her way nearer to me.

When she achieved the front row, I had been forced to tell her that I was much too old for her and besides I had made a deathbed vow to eternal celibacy.

The love of my youth, Lucinda, a fragile creature, sensitive and doomed by the fates, gradually wasted away with something resembling consumption, and left me alone to face the world—overcome by grief, but looking forward to joining her at some future date.

It is a tragic story—and wholly untrue—but it has protected me for many years. It is usually enough to send the eager ones away misty-eyed and pondering deliciously on the unutterable cruelty of life.

But I'm not sure how Emmeline took it.

She was still in the front row.

At the nine-twenty bell, I cut off my lecture and the students departed. But not Emmeline.

She regarded me with what appeared to be overpowering sympathy. "There's no use brooding about Lucinda, Professor. Life goes on."

I sighed. "Not for me. I merely exist."

Was there a tear in her eye? "You really miss her, don't you?"

My smile betrayed the maturity of suffering. "More than I can say. But every hour brings me closer to her. My existence in this world is nothing. I court danger."

She touched my arm gently. "Perhaps you will see her soon. Sooner than you think."

She wiped the tear from her eye and left the room.

Now what had she meant by that? Perhaps you will see her soon. Sooner than you think.

A thought came to me.

She was also a member of the murder committee.

Did she know something?

I had no other class until ten-thirty, so I went to the library to do research on the paper I was writing for the Law Review.

At ten-twenty, I returned my reference volumes to the desk and left the building. I stood for a moment at the top of the steps.

It was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day. Down below me at least a hundred students were gathered in sundry small groups—the girls busy at their primary motive for attending . . .

I felt ill.

Freddie Thompson was poring over a notebook, but he looked up. Was that thin smile a greeting?

The brooding James Branner was there—brooding—and so was stilt-like Roy Wickens of the make-up class. And Professor Lasson. Were his eyes narrowed in glorious anticipation of something?

And Emmeline Grogan, who for mercy's sake might—

I fled back into the library.

I mopped my brow and went to the window.

Yes, they were all waiting. I knew that as surely as I stood there cowering.

How could one man have so many enemies? Perhaps I had been a bit too caustic in my relations with others. Perhaps my courses had been a little too stiff. Perhaps the world needed bad lawyers as well as good ones. Perhaps I should long ago have buried that story about Lucinda. But what is a man to do? He must live; he must be himself. And when the time comes . . .

I straightened. A man must be a man. He must be honest with himself; he must hew to his path—to the very last moment.

I walked to the desk and spoke to Miss Hendricks, the librarian. "Do you have a sheet of paper and an envelope, please?"

She got them for me and I went to a table. I addressed the envelope to the president of the university.

I dated the blank sheet of paper and began writing.

Dear Sir:

On the desk in my study you will find a theme by one James Branner, a student. I have given him the grade of B. That is an error. It should be a C.

Yours inflexibly,

Alfred Ranier

It was my last testament, but one must not leave things undone.

I took the sealed envelope back to the desk. "Please put a stamp on this and mail it when you can." I felt impelled to add, "Miss Hendricks, you conduct one of the finest and quietest libraries in the country."

And then I walked to the large front doors.

I paused only a moment, straightened my shoulders, and stepped outside.

It was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day. Down below me . . .

But I had been through all that twice before.

I walked slowly down the steps, my head high.

He stepped quickly from a group of students. He raised the .38 Magnum which could devastate an automobile.

I stared at him.

Professor Harding!

But what had I ever done . . .

The muzzle of the gun flashed and I felt the blow at my chest.

Everything went black.

I came to as they were carrying me into the library. I felt the distinct inclination to moan, but I suppressed it. I would die like a gentleman.

They put me tenderly on a couch.

"You can open your eyes now, Professor Ranier." It was the voice of Emmeline Grogan. "It's all over."

I opened my eyes.

"You were superb," Freddie Thompson said. "I've never seen anything more natural."

I looked down at my chest.

There was no blood.

Freddie looked a little concerned. "Are you all right, Professor Ranier?"

I sat up slowly and unbuttoned my coat. There was no hole in the shirt either and my heart was beating. I could hear it. Unquestionably I was alive and functioning. I gave thanks that I'd made it.

"I knew we didn't make a mistake when we picked you," Freddie said. "You're our favorite professor."

My nose and forehead wrinkled, in puzzlement and wonder.

Freddie nodded. "Some of the other professors gave me A's simply because they didn't want to spoil my record. But you gave me a B when I deserved it. I admire your integrity and courage, sir. You taught me humility."

Naturally, we had to shake hands. Freddie expected it.

The brooding James Branner smiled. "You give me C's. Everybody else gives me C-minus."

The tall Roy Wickens had something to say, too. "I needed the extra six months here. I couldn't have passed the State Bar exams anyway."

Emmeline Grogan patted my shoulder. "Professor, have you ever investigated spiritualism? I mean the seance? I have an aunt who's positively psychic and tingling with empathy. She might be able to get you in touch with Lucinda. You're my favorite professor, too, and I don't like to see anybody suffer. Like dogs or people."

I was still feeling relief and gratitude for the turn of events, when Professor Harding entered the library through the rear door. He beamed. "Everybody was so stunned that I hadn't the slightest difficulty in making my escape. Some of the students recognized me, of course, and so we'll have the trial. But I have the feeling that if I'd disguised myself just a little bit, I could have gotten away with an actual murder."

It was then that I noticed Professor Lasson. He leaned against a bookcase; his right hand in his suitcoat pocket—the one in which the genuine cartridges reposed.

His eyes glowed as he studied me and a faint reproachful smile played on his lips.

I had a terribly strong feeling that what Harding had said had given him an idea.

And the room grew colder.

The murder could occur at any time, I realized suddenly. Any time at all.

But perhaps it too would take place on a beautiful, crisp, sunny day.

And down below me at least a hundred students would be gathered . . .

Innocent Witness

by Irving Schiffer

The detective was waiting for her as she emerged from the office building at five o'clock. Suddenly in the midst of the homegoers he was standing before her, very tall, a young man with a surprisingly gentle voice and considerate manner.

"Hello, Julie," he said.

She was twenty, a dark-haired girl who worked as a secretary in the financial district of New York. She was one of many, not much different at first glance from the girls who sat at the desks around her, pretty enough, not very sophisticated, a girl everyone liked, accustomed to anonymity. She was, above all things, not used to being singled out by detectives; and she looked about self-consciously as the other girls passed, certain that some of them recognized Sergeant Ruderman from his visit to the office that morning.

"I wonder," he said, as if sensing her thoughts, "is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

She nodded gratefully. "Yes, there's a diner next door."

Bill's Diner was one of those trolley-shaped affairs with a long counter, a few booths, and very good food. They sat in a booth; Julie facing the rear, and he signaled for two coffees. She looked at the telephone booths and thought that perhaps, if she were going to be late for dinner, she ought to call her mother. He said nothing until after coffee had arrived.

"Julie—Miss Stevens—something has been bothering me all day. This morning, when I spoke to you in your office—"

"Yes?"

"I had the feeling you wanted to tell me something. About your boss, Mr. Turner, and his wife."

She shook her head. She sipped at the coffee so that she could look away from him.

"I told you everything, Sergeant Ruderman."

"Did you?" If he weren't a policeman, his easy tone of voice could be considered that of a friend, even a lover. He was a nice man, she thought, and he was probably very good at his job. "You know what I think," he said, smiling faintly over his steaming coffee mug. "I think you're a very confused girl. Maybe you've a misdirected sense of loyalty. Come to think of it, I like a person who's loyal."

She didn't fall into that trap. "I really can't think of anything I haven't told you," she insisted.

"About the Turners. . . they weren't getting along too well. Some of their friends have told us that. Did they have a blowup or a serious argument in the last few days?"

Julie shrugged. She could tell he didn't believe her, but he wasn't angry. He was an even-tempered man, and he was calm as he finished his coffee, looking at her all the while. Then suddenly he glanced at his watch and placed some change on the table for the waiter. He handed her a card.

"That's my number at the station. You can call at any hour." His grin was a pleasant surprise. "Just in case you find you have something to tell me, I mean. Now, will you kindly write *your* name and address on this other card?"

"My address?" she said warily.

"Sure. Have you ever had a date with a detective?"

She thought of his motives, of his job.

"Don't worry," he said. "You won't hear from me until *after* the case is closed. I don't mix business with pleasure. And I don't meet girls like you every day."

She liked him, there was no getting away from that. And the straightforward, almost vulnerable way he looked at her was convincing enough for any girl. She filled in the back of the card and handed it to him.

"You'll hear from me," he said. "Or maybe—who can tell?—maybe I'll hear from you first. Goodnight, Julie."

After he left, she barely moved. A woman walked past to enter one of the phone booths. Abstractedly, Julie watched the stranger's lips through the glass door and thought again that she ought to call her mother; but she couldn't move.

Yes, there was something. The detective was right. It was not only the problem between Mr. Turner and his wife. About that she had lied. It was something else. But *what*?

She sighed. It occurred to her that Sergeant Ruderman might even believe there had been something between *her* and Mr. Turner. Well, there hadn't been. Not really. Mary kept hinting that there was, but Mary was always carrying on . . . like yesterday morning at the office—Wednesday—just before Mrs. Turner called.

Mary was Mr. Cassidy's secretary. He was one of several vice presidents at Empire Investment—married, an outrageous wolf. Sometimes it seemed as though Mary, blonde and vivacious, led him on—just a little. On Wednesday morning, there was a lot of flirtatious patter before Mr. Cassidy got past Julie's and Mary's adjacent desks to enter his own office.

"Sometimes I'm inclined to forget that he's married," Mary remarked, once his door had closed behind him.

"You're just a lot of big talk," said Julie.

"Oh, I don't know. Married men are just men who happen to be married. Don't be so naïve, Julie. All these vice-presidents with their private telephone lines: . . . I'll bet it isn't all business they talk about behind those closed doors. And I'll bet if your Mr. Turner gave you a tumble, you wouldn't exactly fight him off. I can tell when a girl has a crush—Oops, get to work, here's your boss now. . . ."

Mr. Turner was as unlike Mr. Cassidy as a man could be. In his middle thirties, the company's youngest vice-president, he was clean-cut, methodical, and one hundred percent business. He walked by the girls' desks quickly, offered a brusque good morning, then disappeared into his office.

"Well, I have to admit he's good looking," Mary sighed. "But did you ever see his wife? Ten years older if she's a day. And she looks like something the cat dragged in."

"No, she doesn't," Julie objected.

"Yes, she does. And everyone here knows he married her strictly for her money. I remember when she was just another rich client—only six months ago—a born old maid if ever I saw one."

"I remember her very well," said Julie. "She was just an unhappy, lonely woman."

"Sure. But then handsome boy took over the account and—wham!—they get married. One of these days, you'll see, he'll quit working, retire for life. . . on her money, of course."

Julie's telephone rang. Saved by the bell, she thought, reaching for it.

But it was quite a shock—speak of the devil—to learn who was calling.
“Julie, this is Mrs. Turner.”

“Oh, good morning. Just one moment, I’ll tell Mr. Turner you’re calling.”

“No, no, no, Julie. I don’t even want him to *know* I’ve called. I want to speak to *you*. Can we meet for lunch? I must have a talk with you.”

“With me?” There was no mistaking the urgency in the woman’s voice; Julie reflected. “Well, yes, of course, Mrs. Turner. What is it you want to speak to me a—?”

A burst of static interrupted the girl as the intercom box on her desk came to life. The signal light was on.

“Julie!” Mr. Turner’s voice crackled.

For one eerie moment, Julie experienced an inexplicable panic. She stared at the intercom box and then at the telephone receiver in her hand, realizing that if Mrs. Turner spoke again her husband would hear. Quickly, Julie clamped her hand over the telephone mouthpiece. Then just as quickly she realized she had covered the wrong end to shut off Mrs. Turner’s voice, and switched to cover the earpiece.

“Julie, will you bring me the file on Sloban Company,” Richard Turner’s voice directed.

“Yes, right away,” said the girl.

She waited until he turned off the intercom, then spoke hurriedly into the telephone. “I have to go now.”

“Yes, I heard,” said the woman.

“I’ll call you back in a few minutes,” Julie promised. “I’d better use a telephone outside. Are you home, Mrs. Turner?”

“Yes. Please don’t forget. I’ll be waiting.”

Mary’s eyebrows were two question marks, but Julie had no time to explain. She moved to the filing cabinets behind the long line of typists’ desks and quickly located the Sloban file. Feeling strangely conspiratorial, she pictured Mrs. Turner in her Washington Square apartment, an overweight, somehow pitiful woman, waiting for the return call. Her expression revealing none of these thoughts, Julie knocked on Mr. Turner’s door.

As she came into his room, Richard Turner was speaking on his private telephone. His grey eyes barely flicked in his secretary’s direction while he continued to charm his widowed client, Mrs. Sloban.

“... Yes, Vera . . . I realize you don’t want to take risks with the

principal. Empire Investment wouldn't allow such recklessness. I mean, we'd certainly advise against it . . .”

Julie gazed at the sharp, handsome profile. As always, it did something to her equilibrium she preferred not to acknowledge. There were two telephones on his desk, one an extension of the phone on her desk; the other for “confidential” contact with clients. Julie could remember when Mrs. Turner was one of those clients, a lonely heiress, who rated long conversations as he was now indulging Mrs. Sloban. Marriage, thought Julie, as she placed the Sloban folder on his desk, can certainly cool a man's ardor . . if there had been any ardor in the first place.

“*Are you waiting for something?*” He had broken off his conversation and was frowning at her irritably. “Well, as long as you're here—” He fingered the folder. “Are the reports in here up to date? I'm speaking to Mrs. Sloban now and I may have to prepare a detailed report tomorrow—”

Julie explained that there was some tallying of latest dividends to complete but she could bring the folder up to date by tomorrow morning. He interrupted with a weary gesture.

“Instead of daydreaming at my desk, Julie, if you paid more attention to your work—”

He tossed the folder on his desk, dismissing her.

A moment later, Julie emerged fuming from the inner office. Mary's gaze followed her to her desk. “Obviously he didn't offer you a raise in salary,” she quipped.

“Mary, tell me, do I ever daydream on the job?”

“Is that what lover boy said?”

Julie opened her desk drawer and yanked out her handbag. “I must be a masochist to find something appealing in a man like that! If he asks for me, say I'm off daydreaming somewhere.”

“You going down to call Mrs. Turner?”

Julie nodded. “I promised. She wants to meet me for lunch. Wouldn't you just bet she'll ask me to help her pick out a lovely surprise gift for her dear, dear husband? Arsenic—that's what I'll recommend!”

The elevator man was chatty and helped to cool Julie's temper as he brought her down five flights to the lobby. The counterman at Bill's Diner next door waved to her familiarly. Faith in human nature was momentarily restored. Julie slipped into one of the telephone booths in the rear of the diner and dialed Mrs. Turner's number.

They arranged to meet for lunch at 12:30, at a restaurant Julie was

reasonably sure her employer was not likely to patronize. He was expected at a business lunch today anyway.

When Julie arrived at the meeting place, Mrs. Turner was already sipping a drink at the table, her gross features a portrait of determination and bitterness.

It was not long before Julie understood the reason for this grim countenance. No sooner had the waitress brought their order when Mrs. Turner clutched her companion's hands across the table.

"Julie, I want you to be honest with me. Don't be afraid of hurting me with the truth—"

"I'll try, Mrs. Turner, but what—?"

"Tell me, is my husband carrying on with another woman?"

The girl was too surprised even to deny having such knowledge. Mrs. Turner leaned forward tensely. "Julie, I *must* know. I'm leaving him anyway, don't you understand? But I must know who she is."

"Mrs. Turner, I really don't know anything about—"

"Yes, you do. You're his secretary. All of you at the office know who she is. Julie, I want to strike back. You can understand that. I want to disgrace both of them!"

"Did he tell you he was in love with some other woman?" Julie asked, aware of a guilty flush on her cheeks.

"Love? Richard doesn't love anybody. He uses people. He married me only for my money." The ugly woman smiled thinly. "But now he's angry at me—oh, how he raged last night!—because I won't transfer any of my money into his account. Transfer my money? What kind of fool does he think I am?"

"Do you know what he said when I refused? He taunted me. He said he was going to find other women...beautiful women...to take his mind off his money troubles—"

"But, Mrs. Turner, he didn't say there already *was* another woman, did he? He only threatened . . ."

The older woman shook her head sagely. "You don't know Richard. He never threatens until he's sure of what he has. The bird in the hand philosophy. But I want to ruin it for both of them. I want to leave *him* before he's ready to leave *me*. Then he'll have nothing. And at the same time I want to create such a scandal that I'll ruin all his chances of marrying someone else. They won't even dare speak to each other after I'm through. Julie, who are his clients? The unattached women?"

She was quite alarmed. "I couldn't give you the names of clients."

Mrs. Turner leaned back with an appearance of defeat. She could sense Julie's determination, and her own wilted. "Oh well, I understand. Of course you can't. I suppose you've been as helpful as you can, and, don't worry, Julie, I won't tell him about our meeting. But tonight I'll tell him I'm through with him . . ." Again she smiled. "I'll *enjoy* telling him. It'll be interesting to see how he tries to convince me he didn't mean to threaten me, that he really loves me. . . Yes, it'll be quite a night."

At the office again, it was impossible to get any work done. Mr. Turner was still out with a client most of the afternoon, but Mary gave her no peace until she had told her everything that happened; and it was relief to share the incident with someone. It was an even greater relief when five o'clock came and she left the office to board the subway to The Bronx.

Not until she was at the dinner table that evening did Julie remember the Sloban account. Her mother was berating her kid sister for not doing her homework, for daydreaming. . . and Julie suddenly realized that in her distress this afternoon, she had forgotten to bring the Sloban folder up to date. The idea of facing Mr. Turner the next day with this oversight was a dreaded one, especially after his criticism this morning and considering the mood he would be in after tonight, after his wife. . .

It was barely seven o'clock, she noted. She could return to the office, bring home the folder to work on it, and have it finished before bedtime. Despite her mother's objections to her going out again, Julie slipped into her coat and dashed out of the house.

The night elevator man at her office building was almost asleep behind his desk. He recognized her and smiled sheepishly.

"Can you take me up and wait for me?" Julie asked, as she signed the register book. He shook his head and reached for his keys. "No, I have to be on duty down here. Just buzz the elevator when you're ready to come down."

He brought her up—the elevator seemed so noisy when the building was empty—and opened the office door with a master key, then returned to his post. Julie felt deserted. Whistling, she snapped on a central overhead light and walked across the empty floor to Mr. Turner's unlighted office.

The Sloban folder was still on his desk. The moment she reached for it, his telephone rang. Her hand jumped back.

The effect of the second loud ring in the darkened office was no less startling. Who could be calling on Mr. Turner's private telephone at this hour?

On the third ring she collected her wits and picked up the receiver.
"Hello. . ." she said.

"What? Who—who is this?"

It was Mr. Turner's voice.

Quickly overcoming her surprise, Julie identified herself. She explained her presence at the office. "Is it all right if I take the folder home to work on it?"

"Yes—yes—certainly. Are you leaving now?"

"Right away, Mr. Turner." She could picture his intense face and she had never before known such a sense of intimacy and aloneness with this man. Perhaps it was simply the fact that it was night. More than anything else, she wanted to prolong the conversation. "Was there anything you wanted, Mr. Turner? Was there anyone—"

"No, of course not." His laugh was short, forced. "I just dialed the wrong number. I was having a few drinks at a bar and got mixed up. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Turner."

She hung up and stared at the telephone. It occurred to her to wonder if Mrs. Turner had already told her husband she was leaving him, disinheriting him, and the rest of what she had threatened. If so, she could understand very well why he was drinking. But why had he called the office—at this hour? Was someone supposed to be here? Had her own presence frightened that other person away? She could not really believe that he had dialed the wrong number.

Julie picked up the Sloban folder and walked out to the center of the floor. She half expected to find some person lurking behind one of the typists' desks. Whatever the explanation, her curiosity had to be satisfied. Why should she let him chase her home? She could do her work here, couldn't she? She sat at her own desk and opened the folder. She could finish posting the dividends in less than an hour. . .

Slightly more than an hour was required. With a sense of accomplishment she closed the folder and returned it to Mr. Turner's desk. At her own desk, she picked up her handbag and topcoat. Then she froze.

Like a shriek in the night, the telephone on Mr. Turner's desk rang . . . first once, then again and again . . .

She swung about to look at the frosted glass entrance door. At any moment, she knew, someone would come bursting through that door in answer to the imperative ringing. But no silhouette approached the glass. Stiffly, resisting the magnetism of the unanswered ringing, Julie made her way across the office floor. Looking back, she flicked off the lights, opened the door, then closed it behind her. Standing at the elevator, she heard the telephone ringing still, like a petulant child, calling her. . . .calling someone. Finally, just before the elevator arrived, the ringing stopped.

In the morning, Mary listened to the previous night's events with wide-eyed astonishment. "You mean he called the office? Yipes, he sure *must* have been plastered! But you know, I can't imagine that man getting so plastered. . . ."

Mr. Turner arrived only minutes late and seemed as self-possessed as ever. He appeared to have forgotten that yesterday existed. After a sharp "Good morning," he entered his office and closed the door behind him. At about 9:20, the intercom came to life on Julie's desk.

"Julie," he said, "will you get Mrs. Turner on the phone for me?"

"Mrs. Turner?"

Somehow she was startled to find that he could still be on speaking terms with his wife.

"Yes, Mrs. Turner. Didn't you hear me?"

What she did hear, just before he broke the connection, was a puzzling undercurrent of sound.

"That's strange. . . ." she mused, turning to Mary.

"What is?"

Julie nodded toward the closed office. "He's calling somebody on his private phone. I could hear him dialing. . . ."

"The other woman," said the blonde girl, snapping her fingers. "He wants her to listen while he talks to his wife, don't you see? Or maybe it's his lawyer. Maybe they'll make a tape recording—evidence for the divorce."

Julie was disgusted with herself for believing Mary even for a second. She picked up the telephone, asked the switchboard girl for an outside line, then dialed. Mrs. Turner's line was busy.

"Well, what did you expect?" Mary said. "She's busy talking to *her* lawyer."

Julie pressed the intercom buzzer and waited for him to switch it on.
"Yes, Julie"

"Your wife's line is busy, Mr. Turner."

"Oh? All right, thank you."

"Shall I try her again in a few minutes?"

"No, don't bother. It's not very important . . ."

Julie was thoughtful as she slipped paper into her typewriter and began almost automatically to compose a monthly statement to a client. She wondered, as she often did when life gave her a glimpse of private lives, what her own future would be. Would she marry someone in all good faith only to learn one day that she hardly knew him at all? Could one trust one's feelings?

Absorbed, Julie did not even notice the two strangers approaching her desk. It was shortly before lunch time. She was typing, and then there was a man's overcoat sleeve and an open hand showing her a wallet with a police badge.

That was the first time she saw Sergeant Ruderman.

"I'm very sorry I startled you. I guess you didn't hear me over your typing. I asked if I could speak to Mr. Turner, please."

There was another detective with him, somewhat shorter, older. She looked from one to the other. Then she nodded decisively. "Will you come this way, please?"

She led them to Mr. Turner's office. She did not follow them inside. Somehow she knew why they were here.

When they emerged with Mr. Turner, she could almost feel what he was feeling. She had never seen him so pale.

"Julie, Mrs. Turner has had an accident. I'll be out—" He looked questioningly at the detectives. "I'll be out the rest of the day."

"An accident? Is it very serious?"

He nodded briefly.

"The maid found her—"

Sergeant Ruderman stepped closer. "I'll explain it to your secretary, Mr. Turner. You'd better go with Detective Wilson. I'll be along later."

When they had gone, he asked Julie to step into Mr. Turner's office. He closed the door and offered her a chair. She knew by the slight narrowing of his hazel eyes that he had somehow read her involuntary feeling of resentment when he, in turn, chose the chair behind the desk.

"Mrs. Turner is dead, isn't she?" Julie asked.

He merely inclined his head, watching her.

"How did it happen? When?"

He showed little expression.

"The maid let herself in around ten o'clock this morning. That's the time she comes in every day. She found Mrs. Turner in the bathtub. Evidently, she had struck her head and . . . You don't really want to hear the details, do you?"

Julie turned away. "No. Of course it *was* an accident, wasn't it?"

"That's the way it appears. Julie, you spoke to Mrs. Turner on the phone this morning, is that right?"

"I did not. Who told you that?"

"Mr. Turner did. He said you called her this morning."

"Yes, he asked me to. But I didn't speak to her. The line was busy at the time."

"I see. Yes—" The detective's lips quirked with spontaneous humor. "That is what he told us. What time did Mr. Turner arrive at the office, by the way?"

"Nine o'clock. A few minutes after nine perhaps."

"And what time did you call Mrs. Turner?"

"Nine-twenty, I think."

"And Mr. Turner did not leave the office since he arrived?"

She was pleased at having stumped the interrogator. "He was here all morning," she said loyally.

"Well, that's good." He too seemed pleased. "We've determined that she died somewhere around nine o'clock. Whether it was before nine or after nine . . . that's in question. However, none of the phones in her apartment were off the hook when we got there, or when the maid got there. And you say her line was busy at nine-twenty. So the probability is that she was alive at that time and had an accident a short while afterward."

He smiled as he walked Julie to the door. "I don't exactly apologize for taking you away from your work. It was a pleasure, I assure you." His expression became earnest. "I admit I did have a kind of feeling . . . Julie, what was their relationship? Were they getting along?"

She almost said it then, all that had happened. He seemed such an easy and trustworthy man to talk to. But she stopped herself. He noticed all these transitions, she was sure.

As he held open the door, his expression was one of doubt and puzzlement. She knew he did not believe her murmured answer that she knew nothing about the Turners.

That was why tonight he had waited for her outside the building and then brought her to Bill's Diner. Yet even he could not fathom how much she had learned in the last two days about that unhappy marriage. Mr. Turner, himself, was totally unaware that she had spoken to his wife and knew so much. Would anything be gained by offering this information? It would only hurt Mr. Turner.

Then why, she wondered, did she have this feeling of wanting to speak to Sergeant Ruderman again, to tell him. . .

"Julie. . ."

It was Mary. She had slipped into the very seat the detective had just vacated.

"Well, don't look so surprised," she said, pouting. "I saw him meet you outside the building, so I waited. You know I can't resist the latest gossip. What did he tell you? What happened?"

"Nothing happened. He asked me again about the Turners and I still didn't tell him."

"Good!"

Julie stared at her.

"Good? Why do you say that?"

"Because what's the point of making extra of trouble for poor Mr. Turner?"

She leaned forward confidentially. "Now, what about that detective? Did he ask you for a date?"

Julie's change in coloration answered her.

"I knew it. . . even by the way he looked at you in the office this morning. Much to my surprise, I envied you that look, gal. And the next time I try to tell you I'm not interested in that sentimental gush, and the next time I say that only money counts, and it makes no difference if your boy friend is married—well, if I ever say those things again after all that's happened, please don't believe me, will you. . ."

Julie put her hand over Mary's.

"I never believed you. One thing I almost believed, though, was that you and Mr. Turner. . . that you—"

"Mr. Turner? Are you serious?"

Julie shrugged.

"It would have explained so many things. But I know it's not true. Still, something—" She frowned as she stared beyond Mary at the empty

telephone booths. Suddenly she snapped her fingers. "Mary, suppose he wasn't calling his lawyer, or some other woman?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Turner. Remember this morning, when I said he was calling somebody on his other telephone? Well, suppose he was ringing his wife's number? I'd get a busy signal if I tried to call it at the same time, wouldn't I?"

Mary was unsure. Julie walked to the counter and asked for change for a dollar bill, then entered one of the booths.

"I have to find out if it works," she said.

"Who are you going to call?" Mary wanted to know.

"I'll call Mr. Turner's house on this phone and let it ring," Julie explained. "Then I'll call the same number from the other booth and see if I get a busy signal."

She started to put a dime in the slot, then pulled her hand away.

"No, I can't call his house. He might answer. Or the police might still be there. Is anyone at your place, Mary?"

Her friend winced. "The whole family."

"They're in at my house too. We need a phone that won't answer. How about the office?"

Mary frowned. "That's true. . .but I think the switchboard automatically shifts a second call to another line. So that wouldn't be a good test. Why don't you call one of the private phones? Mr. Turner's phone doesn't go through the switchboard."

Julie had already dropped the dime in the slot. She dialed carefully. They could hear the buzz-click as the telephone rang at the other end. Suddenly Julie gasped. With a stunned expression, she slowly hung up the receiver.

"What's the matter?" Mary stepped into the booth. "Why did you hang up? I thought you were going to let it ring and then try calling the number on the other—"

Julie was shaking her head. "No, Mr. Turner already made the test. . .last night. That was why he called the office. Now I can understand why he was so shocked when I answered. . ."

"Then he *did* it? He *murdered* her? You mean, she was probably dead before he even came to work this morning?"

Julie shuddered. "It's unbelievable. . .that it could happen with people in your own office, people you see every day. Do you know what gives

me the creeps, Mary? It's knowing that I saw *everything*. I was part of everything that happened. I was a witness to every part of it . . . but I didn't realize it at the time."

She reached into her handbag for the detective's card.

"He said I had a misdirected sense of loyalty. Sergeant Ruderman, I mean. I guess he was right." Julie dialed the number from the card. "Hello," she said into the mouthpiece, "is this the police station? Has Sergeant Ruderman arrived? He has? Yes, I'd like to speak to him . . ."

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H1AAKS

Dead Stop on the Road South

by Robert Colby

They had just left a swift span of interstate highway but now the route south toward Florida was continued on a narrow, two-lane road which would pass through a series of small towns. Determined to reach their usual stopping place between New York and Florida before midnight, Stan Sherwood ignored the reduced speed limit and poured gas to his luxurious new sedan.

Stan and his wife, Barbara, had been driving steadily since dawn. It was a familiar, monotonous trip and, always in a hurry to escape the winter, they generally paused only once for a few hours of sleep.

Stan Sherwood had been an account executive for a large New York stockbroker. His personal speculations were often far more daring than those of his clients, and at thirty-eight he had amassed a fortune large enough to drift for the rest of his life if he chose. He had sold all but a few blue-chip stocks, and was on the way to another fortune in Florida real estate.

Beside him, Barbara, thirty-one, mink-coated and attractive, though at times she looked deceptively haughty, poured coffee from a vacuum bottle. She offered him the cup.

"No thanks, honey. Way that stuff tastes, I'm sure it's the same batch of coffee they served up last year, slightly warmed over. All the roadside joints in these burgs share the same coffee grounds."

She chuckled. "They must share the same cook, too. All the food tastes alike."

"In this part of the country you don't call it food," he said. "Don't you read the signs? *Eats and gas*. Gives it that homey touch. Just plain folks serving just plain eats and just plain gas."

"They don't season the gas, either?"

"Not really," he replied. "Sometimes they add a little water." She lighted a cigarette for him and he asked the time.

"Going on ten," she reported. "Sleepy?"

"Not sleepy. Tired."

"Want me to drive?"

"We'll have to stop for gas in a while. Then we'll switch."

They crossed a bridge and a sign advised a change of county. Another sign reminded that the night speed limit was fifty. He was doing a little better than sixty-five and again he ignored the warning.

Moments later, there was a flash of red in his rearview and he swore softly as the patrol car pulled abreast and a cop waved him over. The money would be no problem, the ticket only an annoyance, but with the out-of-state tag they would haul him in to post bond or pay the fine. The way these jerkwater cops went about things it might be a slow process and, already exhausted, the delay would prevent them from making it to the luxury and rest of the best motel along the entire route.

"Probably cost us nearly an hour," he told Barbara as he braked and pulled to the side of the road.

"Maybe they'll just give you a warning," she suggested hopefully.

He snorted. "Never. They'll take a look at the car and another look at you in that mink and they'll double the fine. These hicks live on the blood of tourists zipping through their hayseed hamlets in big cars on the way to Florida."

"You sound like a professional cynic," she said. "No doubt it's just a job to them and they couldn't care less about where we live."

With a sigh, Stan cut the motor and waited. There were two cops and one of these, partner to the driver, got out and approached Stan's window with cocky-casual strides. He was big and tall and booted. Something in the cut of his uniform and his unbending posture gave him a Gestapo-like arrogance.

Stan poked the button and the electric window slid down to admit a draft of frigid air.

"Your driver's license, sir," the cop demanded.

Stan removed the license from his wallet and handed it over. The cop studied it briefly under a flashlight, returned it.

"We'll have to take you in to the station, Mr. Sherwood," he said, his mouth tight, his face a pale, sharp stone in shadow.

"Well," said Stan, producing a fifty dollar bill, "I'll admit that I was speeding, but we're mighty pressed for time. So why don't you just take this fifty and pay the fine for me, Officer. I'd be most grateful."

The cop glanced at the bill without touching it. His lips spread contemptuously, "Now, you know better than that, mister. Besides, I think you're gonna have a lot more to worry you than a little ole speedin' citation."

"Look, Officer," Stan replied, stuffing the bill into his wallet, "please don't threaten me. Just say what you mean."

"You'll find out what I mean soon enough." His eyes swept over the car, slid inside to Barbara. He motioned to his partner to drive on ahead, then climbed imperiously into the back of the sedan. "Get behind that patrol car," he ordered. "It'll lead you to the station."

Stan started the motor and followed the taillights of the retreating cruiser. No use arguing with a rube cop, he decided. Keep calm, speak to someone in higher authority.

"Why don't you tell us what it's all about," Barbara said waspishly, turning toward the cop, her face taut; angry. "You imply that we've committed some crime, when we were only speeding."

"Shut up," Stan said softly. "It's obviously a mistake, and I'll straighten it out with the officer in charge."

Shortly, they left the highway and rode a broken blacktop for a mile and a half before taking a dirt road to a gate which opened upon a squat frame building. There was a green globe above the door and a sign: *Sheriff's Substation*. The building was small and grey and somber.

Escorted by the two officers, they entered a rectangular room containing a couple of scarred desks behind a railing, some wooden chairs, an ancient typewriter and a filing cabinet.

The driver cop pressed a button which was on the wall just inside the door and then they waited, standing about uncomfortably behind the railing.

After what seemed time enough to assemble a regiment, a man entered from a door at the back of the room. He was buttoning the jacket of a sheriff's uniform and smoothing a great welter of coarse black hair with a knotty hand. He was a heavy man, with a large nose set in a square, rockjawed face. His deep brown eyes under bushy brows seemed to have been startled from sleep. They studied Stan and his mink-coated wife with roving speculation.

"Well, well, what you got here, Floyd?" he said cheerfully to the arresting officer, whose partner was slouched in a corner, smoking a cigarette.

"We got trouble, Sheriff," said Floyd, and stepped behind the rail.

The sheriff seated himself at a desk and they conferred inaudibly, a frown grooving the sheriff's homely features. Floyd passed him a slip from his notebook, in which he had been writing under the flash on the back seat of the Sherwoods' car. The sheriff searched the filing cabinet and came up with a square of paper which he placed on his desk beside the deputy's notations. For a moment he compared the two papers. He glanced up darkly.

"Speeding," he declared. "I got no use for speeders, none at all. This county, we go mighty hard on speeders. We fix it so they don't forget us in no hurry. That's a fact but, mister, you got a real good excuse—ain't that right?"

"No, sir," Stan said meekly. "I have no reasonable excuse and I'm sorry. I'd like to pay the fine."

"No reasonable excuse, huh? Well now, I disagree. When a man is drivin' a stolen car worth close to ten grand, he's got all the excuse in the world to be hustlin' down the road. 'Cause he's just naturally gonna be in a hurry to escape the law. And I call that plenty reasonable."

"Stolen car!" Stan said incredulously. "What stolen car? I bought that car in New York three months ago and I've got the registration to prove it's mine." He fumbled the ID from his wallet and thrust it across the rail.

The sheriff examined it, then glanced at the paper on his desk. He looked up.

"Same car all right, accordin' to the hot-sheet."

"Then it's all a mistake, right?"

"Nope. Wrong! Way I see it, you and the woman swiped the car from this here Sherwood. Maybe it was some sort of con game, it don't say here, but anyway, you got the car from this guy, along with his wallet and papers."

"Fantastic!" Stan snapped. "Absolutely fantastic! *My* name is Sherwood, and this lady is *Mrs.* Sherwood."

"Yes," Barbara said indignantly, "I'm Mrs. Barbara Sherwood and this is my husband. Do we look like a couple of car thieves?"

"Well—I must admit," the sheriff retorted, "that even in that stolen mink you look pretty good to me, miss. But over to the state lockup for women we got a few dames just as classy." He snickered. "And not near as sassy." He grinned.

"I don't care for your sense of humor, Sheriff, whatever-your-name," Stan growled.

"Sheriff Clyde Hamlin, Mister. And you better get used to my sense of humor 'cause you may be enjoyin' it for some time to come." He leaned back and lit a cigar in a smug, lazy motion.

"That right?" said Stan.

"Mmmmm," said Hamlin, nodding happily, forming a circle with his lips, pushing smoke at them across the railing. "Yup, that is the God's honest truth I'm tellin'."

"I'm accused of stealing my own car?"

Hamlin stared with narrowed eyes.

"What about my signature? I can sign my name exactly as it's signed on these papers in my wallet."

"Good con man is also a good forger. Ain't that so, Bart?" he said to the second officer. "You was a guard over to the state prison and you should know."

"Yes, sir, Sheriff," he answered. "Take my word for it."

"If it's your car," said the deputy, Floyd; "show us the title, or a bill of sale."

"D'you think I would carry papers like that around with me? They're in a safety deposit box."

"Too bad," the sheriff said. "They won't help you none there."

"I'd like to call my lawyer," Stan said.

Hamlin nodded. "Sure, you got a local man?"

"Of course not! I don't even know the name of the nearest town. I mean my lawyer in New York."

"We don't allow long distance calls."

"I'll pay for the call."

"Don't matter. It's a rule—and a rule is a rule. Any case, a New York shyster won't do you no good. Likely he couldn't get here for a day or two. The court will appoint an attorney."

"All right," Stan said wearily. "How much to buy us out of this phony rap?"

The sheriff leaned forward sharply. "That sounds like a bribe to me. You got one charge of attempted bribery 'gainst you already. This officer tells me you tried to grease him with a fifty. I'd advise you to keep your mouth shut before you lose your whole leg in it, mister."

"I'd like to post bail," Stan said quietly.

Hamlin shook his head. "Can't do that tonight. Auto theft is a felony, in which case only the judge can set the amount of bail."

"And just when will the judge be available to set bail?"

"Can't say exactly. He's got a mighty stack of cases to handle, 'nough to fill a barn. With luck he might get around to it tomorrow, but I wouldn't take no bets."

"And meanwhile?" Stan said with forced control.

"Meanwhile, this place is kinda like a motel with bars. We got some nice rooms in back, all free. The chow ain't good, but it ain't bad, either. Step forward and empty your pockets on this here desk!"

Stan hesitated. Floyd clutched him by the arm and maneuvered him through a swinging gate to the desk. Beside his cash-heavy wallet, Stan placed his keys, a handkerchief, a book of traveler's checks amounting to fifteen hundred dollars, and his own personal checkbook. An expensive watch and a gold ring were also demanded of him.

The sheriff jammed a piece of paper into the typewriter. "Your name?" he questioned.

"Stanley Sherwood."

"Your *real* name?"

"Stanley Sherwood."

"John Doe," said the sheriff, typing.

"Your address?"

"Same as the one on my registration and driver's license."

"Address unknown," the sheriff mumbled, typing again.

"Occupation?"

"Stock and real estate investments."

Hamlin continued typing. He went over the items on the desk, listing them, counting the money and checks. He gave the paper to Stan, who read it in a haze of anger and frustration, certain he would awaken from this sordid dream at any moment.

He glanced up at his wife, who stood gaping beyond the rail. Wide-eyed, she had doubled a black-gloved hand and was chewing her knuckles. She looked hopelessly inept and fragile. He felt pity for her and at the same time he resented her silly pose, wishing she would break the silence with an explosive scene in his defense.

"If it's all correct, sign it," Hamlin ordered, extending a pen.

Stan signed the paper and the sheriff stowed it away in a drawer of the desk. His eyes fastened upon Barbara: "You're next, Miss," he said. When

she stood rooted, Bart took her wrist and pulled her, stumbling, to the sheriff's desk. "Keep your hands off my wife!" Stan barked.

"Make me," Bart said with a slit grin, one hand resting on the butt of his holstered revolver.

"Don't gamble I won't," Stan said evenly, his muscles tensing dangerously.

"Now don't race your motor," said the sheriff, removing the cigar from moist lips in a leisurely gesture. "You're just makin' noise but you ain't goin' nowhere." Again he eyed Barbara. "All right, little girlie, everything on the desk." When she stood dumbly, he plucked the pocketbook from her fingers. "You got a watch and a ring, let's have them too. Nothin' goes with you, law says. It's a nice warm cell and you won't need that fur, neither."

Although he had seen it coming, Stan had not believed that they would actually jail his wife. "She's no part of this, Sheriff," he thundered. "You're not going to put my wife in some dirty cell!"

"Call her your wife if you want. The law says she's an accomplice and she goes into a cell like anyone else."

"Listen, Hamlin," Stan threatened, leaning on the desk, "you and your hick cops just try railroading *my* wife into jail on this trumped-up charge and when I get out I'll come back and spill your fat carcass all over this county!"

The sheriff casually took the cigar from his mouth, studied the glowing tip, then jammed it savagely against Stan's cheek, grasping him by the hair and grinding the ash deeply into his flesh with a twisting motion.

"I ain't sure you'll *ever* get out now," he said when Stan's scream faded to a soft moan, a palm held over his agonized cheek.

The sheriff opened Barbara's pocketbook and turned it upside down on his desk, where half a dozen items clattered, a lipstick rolling to the floor. Standing quickly, he caught her coat by the collar and yanked it from her. He jerked a glove from her hand and was working with demented energy to separate the big diamond from a reluctant finger when Stan shoved him off and punched him solidly in the mouth, giving a hundred eighty pounds to the blow, plus the added steam of his fury.

Hamlin crashed to the floor in a sprawling heap. He climbed to his feet awkwardly, blood washing the fingers he held to his mouth. When he dropped the hand to his holster, he revealed a jagged gap of broken teeth.

He brought the gun up swiftly and fired. The little flame seemed to spurt directly at the center of Stan's forehead, but the shot was wildly aimed and only gouged a tiny notch from his left ear.

Floyd chopped the sheriff's wrist before he could squeeze off the carefully aimed second shot. Bart clubbed Stan from behind and darkness fell.

When Stan regained consciousness, he was lying on the bottom bunk in a cell so narrow it seemed almost possible to reach out and touch the opposite wall. Apparently, the cell was windowless, though there was an air duct in the ceiling beside a naked globe.

A solid steel door sealed the room. It contained a slot large enough to deliver food and observe the prisoners. Against the back wall there was a large, covered bucket which he guessed was a concession to sanitation.

He surveyed these arrangements with only a small movement of his head. He felt somewhat as if he had awakened from a monumental hang-over. His head throbbed and there was a thin bandage taped to his ear. His cheek was sore to the touch and had begun to blister. His overcoat and gloves had been taken but otherwise he was dressed as before. The room was uncomfortably warm, the stale air tainted by the sharp odor of disinfectant.

Wondering now if there might be a companion prisoner, he climbed gingerly to his feet. No, the top bunk was vacant. He searched his pockets but they were all empty. Wrenching out of his suitcoat, he glanced about woefully. It was a strange cell, little more than a large coffin. Were they holding Barbara in a similar tomb? The thought depressed him unbearably. Further, he was stricken by a frightening sense of claustrophobia.

The only light, from beyond the door and cut to the size of its window, barely lifted the cell from darkness. How much time had passed? In such a place you couldn't tell night from day.

He went to the door and peered out through the chest-high slot. He viewed a narrow corridor spaced with three other doors, all identical. The cells were in a row, except for one which stood by itself at the right extreme of the brief passageway, crossing it. Where the corridor terminated to the left, a guard sat cross-legged on a wooden chair, smoking a cigarette. A shotgun rested against the wall beside him.

Stan managed to put his head through the opening and call to the guard, who ambled over with the cigarette fixed to his mouth. He was

young and lanky. He had a slouching posture and a lean, farmboy's face.

"Yeah?" he said. "What's the beef?" The cigarette bobbed between blade-thin lips.

"What time is it?" Stan asked him.

The guard examined his watch. "Ten past eleven."

"Night?"

"Sure, what else? You ain't been out much more'n a half hour. You feelin' okay?"

"Well, I'm alive, at least."

"You're lucky, friend. The sheriff and his goons play rough." He plucked the butt from his mouth and ground it underfoot. "Man, you sure belted him a good one right in the kisser," he said delightedly. "He'll be huntin' up a couple teeth for hisself."

"Sounds like you don't care much for the sheriff."

"Hamlin?" He smiled a crooked smile. "Hate his guts. Got plenty reason to, would take a year to tell. Listen, I don't hold with what he done to you people. Just remember that if the time ever comes when you get outta here."

"When do you think that'll be?"

"Huh!" he snorted. "No tellin'. Way you punched him out, you might rot in here for a month or more till he cools enough even to get his mind onto it."

"And my wife?"

"Same."

"No! He can't do it! The law is clear! The law states that—"

"Clyde Hamlin is the law—his own law. 'Round here anyway."

"There are people above him we can reach."

"When? You'll have a beard down to your belly. Sides, he'll cover his tracks and his deputies'll swear to anythin' he builds up against you people."

"We'll see about that. What's your name?"

"Sam."

"Can you help us, Sam?"

"Don't see how."

"You could get word to someone for us."

"Nah. He'd find out and bust my head in. Can't risk it."

"I'd make it worth your while, Sam."

"A dead man ain't got no use for dough. You don't cross Hamlin. He's

a nut. Outta his skull. Somethin' happened to him a while back, made him that way."

"What?"

"Tell you sometime, maybe. I gotta move on."

"You can't help us, then?"

Sam was silent, his bleak, bony features groping painfully with his thoughts. "Might be I could find some way to help," he said. "But not with the law."

"What then?"

"Don't know. Lemme think on it a bit."

"Where's my wife now, Sam?"

He pointed. "Down to the end. They got a special cell for women. She really your wife?"

"Yes. Is the cell like this one?"

"Pretty much. All them tin boxes're alike. One she's in is bigger. Holds four dames, five wormed in when business is good and it gets loaded up with customers."

Stan moaned. "She never saw the inside of a-jail, let alone one like this."

"Supposed to be temporary," Sam said. "Just overnight stuff. They was gonna build a good one, never got around to it. You want a weed?"

"What?"

"A butt."

"Please. I could use one."

Sam produced a cigarette and held a match for him. As an afterthought, he handed over the rest of the pack. "Got plenty more," he said. "You wanna light, just holler. Prisoners ain't allowed no matches." He went away.

Beyond the door to the jail section, in the reception area, a tall, greying man in his sixties, neatly dressed and reflecting an air of moneyed dignity, was being confronted by Sheriff Hamlin and his patrol officers, Floyd and Bart.

"This is an outrageous complaint!" the man said forcefully, though his voice trembled with emotion. "It's completely false and unjustified. You have no right to hold me another minute! What evidence do you have? Where's your witness?"

"Don't tell *me* what I can do," said Sheriff Hamlin, who was again behind his desk, scowling and nursing a badly swollen, discolored lip

which at least had the advantage of concealing the recent embarrassment to his front teeth. "We get an APB to pick up a hit-run driver who slaughters some innocent woman crossin' a street in a town sixty miles north, we damn well are gonna grab that man and hold 'im till the law in that town sends people to return him to justice.

"Yessir, if it takes till doomsday, you'll be here when they come. The burden of proof is on them people. Evidence I don't need, beyond what's on this here piece of paper." He glanced down and began to read: "A 1968 sedan, color, light green, with white-wall tires. Bears AAA emblem on rear bumper, the front right fender dented." That sound like your auto?"

"Yes, but that fender was damaged when a man backed out of—"

"Witness identifies license number as follows," Hamlin continued. "Tag number ID-82347. Now how 'bout it, mister? That plate go with your car? And is the car registered in your name—Howard W. Stoneman?"

"Yes, but—"

"And would you be described as," glancing down at the paper again, "a male Caucasian sixty some years, grey hair, slim build, appears to be tall . . . Sound like you?"

"Yes, but I tell you it's a mistake! I never in my life—"

"That's enough, Stoneman. Step forward to this here desk and empty your pockets. C'mon, snap it up! Floyd, is this man nailed to the floor? Bring 'im here to me!"

Three days passed and, presumably, nights also, though one could not be distinguished from the other in the changeless confinement of the tiny cell.

On the night following his arrest, Stan Sherwood was given a reluctant companion to warm the top bunk. Dennis Kinard was a small, quiet man of fifty-two, unassuming behind steel-rimmed glasses, though he was vice-president of a national food products corporation. Like Stan, he had been traveling south to Florida, driving with his wife in a car which was practically fresh from the showroom floor.

He had been exceeding the speed limit when arrested. Later, an open bottle of Scotch was found in the car. After his wife had been trapped into admitting that she had taken her turn at the wheel, the bottle was produced and they were held on the ridiculous charge of drunk driving. They were in custody until the judge could "find time" to fix bail.

"Naturally," Kinard reasoned, "it's a frameup, some kind of swindle I haven't yet figured. Either that, or this peanut-town sheriff is a maniac with some sort of grudge against the world, especially the world of people who have a little stature and a degree of wealth."

"I don't know what other poor suckers they've got lumped in this sardine can, but I'd be willing to wager my grandfather's gold pocketwatch that they own shiny new cars the likes of which are rarely seen in these parts, except breezing through town on the way south."

"Well, I can't predict how or when the game will end," replied Stan. "But the guard, who appears a minor friend in the enemy camp, implies that Hamlin is a psycho who might be taking vengeance for something done to him in the past."

"When I get out," Kinard promised, "that man will hold office in a cell of his own, even if I have to go before the governor himself!"

Since the arrival of Kinard, Sam, the guard, refused to discuss further his tentative offer of help. "I'm workin' on it," was all he would say in a whisper when he got Stan alone by the door. "Meantime, you don't tell nobody. You don't say nothin' to your mate there, understand?"

On the morning of the fourth day, with Stan in a frenzy of rage and frustration, Sam unlocked the door and took Dennis Kinard off to the "showers," winking at Stan behind Kinard's back.

Stan did not understand the wink until it came his turn for the welcome cleansing.

The "showers" was a tiny cubicle at the end of the corridor. It was composed of a single, tin-stall shower, a wash basin, and a mirror. Below the mirror on a shelf was an assortment of shaving equipment.

Sitting on a stool, cradling his shotgun, Sam delayed until Stan had bathed and was beginning to shave before he spoke.

"I been savin' you for the last," he said. "This way we can chew a bit longer without nobody breakin' it up. Now, first, I'm gonna tell you straight out about this here Sheriff Hamlin. Like I tol' you, he's a nut. How he come to be that way is like this. Five, six months back he had hisself a daughter. Pretty little thing, goin' on nine, she was. The mama, she done died long ago.

"Well, sir, the sheriff, he lives right smack onto the edge of the highway, this side of town—which is near to three miles south once you get to the main road. One day this city fella and his woman come speedin'

down the highway all boozed up and goin' ninety to the wind in one of them sparky New York cars longer than Mr. Peabody's hearse. Speed limit says thirty, mind you, but they didn't pay it no heed."

"They hit his little girl, I suppose," said Stan, turning from the mirror with a lathered face.

"Sure, don't take no brain to see that. Clobbered her so hard she was squashed like a bug against the grill, then kept right on goin' and never did get caught up. Truck driver seen the whole thing but he can't make the plate at that speed. Car just lost itself like smoke in a storm."

"How'd they know the people were drunk?" Stan questioned, yanking at his four-day beard with the razor but eyeing Sam in the mirror.

"Anyone flyin' that speed in a thirty mile zone has just got to be stone drunk," Sam said doggedly.

"So now Hamlin makes whipping boys out of rich tourists who roll by in big, classy cars; that it, Sam?"

"How's that?"

"He takes revenge by arresting people like us on any old pumped-up charge he can find."

"Yeah, that's it. Longer he holds 'em, better he likes it, too."

"How does he get away with it?"

"Well, Clyde Hamlin is nuts, maybe, but he's sharper'n that razor. You could cut yourself on his brain."

"I'm sorry about his little girl," said Stan. "But that doesn't mean I excuse him." He washed the lather from his face and turned, mopping his skin with a paper towel. "Are you going to help us, Sam?"

"Might. Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on how well you scratch my back 'fore I scratch yours."

"Don't tell me you're on the take, Sam. That makes you almost as bad as Hamlin and his boys." Stan pulled on his soiled shirt and fingered the buttons. He was smiling a little, not really offended or surprised.

"No, sir, you can't put me in the same sty with Hamlin and his boys." Sam pinched his angular chin. "But I ain't much for pure charity, neither. Not the way this thing has got to be done."

"How, Sam?"

"Well, since I can't pigeon to the law upstairs and it won't do no good nohow, the only way is to bust you people out."

"You could do that?"

"Late at night, when Hamlin is asleep and his goons're on patrol."

"Now you're talking, Sam!"

"Yah, but course they'd know I done it. Couldn't be nobody else. One guard; that's me. Sleep in a little crib up front, this side of the cell block door. I'm always on call. Day off, Bart takes over—oletime guard hisself. I got no home, was glad to find even this hole to crawl into."

Stan tucked his shirt into his pants thoughtfully. "So, if they will know you let us go, what then?"

"That would blow it sky-high for me. Here lies Sam, like this—" He made a slit-throat gesture.

"Well you must have the answer, Sam, or we wouldn't be talking, would we?"

"Only one answer. When I bust you folks out, I go along with you. Maybe just to the next state: Or maybe clear down to Florida. Yeah, that would be a gas. Summer sun and coconuts, pretty gals, 'n sand between the toes." His rustic features exploded in a toothy grin.

"O.K., Sam, you've got a deal."

"Not so fast, friend. Slow down so I can catch the brass ring. I'll need more'n a little ole ride south. I'll need a stake. A big stake. Good job gone, no place to duck in outta the rain, no steady eats to warm the belly. Now what I always wanted was to hitch up a little business of my own. Maybe a hash house, even a little old burger stand."

"I hear you, Sam, but you're far away. How much?"

"Well, I reckon ten grand would do it up sweet."

"Ten thousand! Sam, you're pulling my leg. Come down out of the clouds. Land somewhere close, will you?"

Sam lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Ten grand," he said. "Take it or leave it. Listen, to me it's a chance in a lifetime. For you, just a fly in the soup. Big man like you, what's ten grand?" He stood. "Think on it, if you want. Ten grand against what? A coupla months, maybe six in this stinkin' can. I reckon more like six, to pay for the sheriff's busted teeth. Might be you could take it, big-man. But not your woman. Another week and she'll climb the walls."

Stan nodded gravely. It was true. Barbara would not be able to endure such an experience. She would be broken by it. And it wasn't as if he couldn't afford the money . . . "But I don't have that kind of money with me," he complained. "Where would I get it?"

"You write a check," said Sam, composing dramatically, a dreamy smile

hovering about his thin lips. "And you make it out to me, Sam Packer. I take it to a bank where I got a bitsy account. I deposit the check and we wait. When it clears on through, I yank out all the dough, and then the three of us zoom off in your sparky gold car." He made a zooming motion with a sweep of his hand.

"It could take a good three or four days before a check on my bank would clear."

"Yeah, but I can have it rushed, special."

"And where would I get the check, Sam? My checkbook was impounded with everything else."

"All that stuff is in a locker," Sam said. "I can get my hands on the key."

"Can you also get your hands on the rest of our property? Traveler's checks, my wallet, watches, rings, and coats?"

"For ten grand, why not?"

"And the car keys?"

"First thing, the keys. We ain't goin' nowhere without we got wheels!"

"How do I know I can trust you after you get the money?"

"What you want, a IOU? You got anyone else you can trust in this joint?"

"All right, Sam. But I'm warning you—"

"Don't gimme no warnin' or the deal is off, pal."

"How soon do we get started with this?"

"Tonight, late. I'll come get you outta the cell. I'll take you to my bin to put your handle on the check. We'll do it when that Kinard fella is asleep. He might sing to Bart when it's his guard trick. Bart would carry it to Hamlin. Don't trust nobody, hear? You tell Kinard and you're a loser."

Stan nodded. "Can you let me see my wife for a minute?"

"Nope. Start a riot. Them other dames'd wanna chew with their men, same way. But I'll try to sneak word to her." With the barrel of the shotgun he gestured toward the door. "You ready? Let's go."

It was after two A.M. by Sam's watch when Sam came for him, Stan discovered later. As Kinard's polite snore testified to sleep, Sam hissed at the cell door, opened it. They stepped softly down the corridor to his oversized closet-of a room. It surrounded a cot, a miniature desk, and a chair. A uniform and other clothing hung on wall pegs.

Sam laid the shotgun on his cot and opened a drawer of his desk. "Got

the checkbook," he said, his hand searching inside the drawer. "I'll stick it in the locker again tonight and they won't never know the difference . . . Somewhere in here I got a pen," he muttered.

Stan had been eyeing the shotgun. It was within easy reach and Sam's back was turned. It was a frightening decision to make in a matter of seconds. If the cops were about, there might be a gunfight and someone could get hurt, including Barbara after he rescued her. On the other hand, if Sam crossed him . . .

Stan snatched the gun and leveled it. "Turn around, Sam. And be careful how you do it."

Sam froze in place for an instant before he peered over his shoulder and came about slowly. "That's the kinda faith you got in me, huh?" He said it with a puzzled shake of his head. "I thought we was friends."

"I never bought a friend who didn't sell me out, Sam. It isn't the money. Money can be replaced. I'm thinking of my wife. I want her out, and I'd rather gamble on this gun than on you. At least it's quicker."

Sam lit a cigarette without asking permission and leaned back against the desk. He was a cool one, all right. Even behind the gun, Stan felt overpowered by his confidence. "I want the keys, Sam. To the cells, my car, and the locker."

Sam exhaled smoke. "You gonna tie me up or beat me down?"

"Neither. I'm going to poke this gun in your back while you help me."

"Suppose I won't give you the keys? Suppose I was to jump you right now for the gun? Would you blast me?"

"No, that would be noisy, Sam. I'd just quietly break a few bones in your head."

Sam smiled easily. "Well, I was just testin' you to see what you was made of. C'mon, let's get to work on that check. The gun ain't loaded." He turned and this time brought the checkbook and a pen from the desk.

It was no lie. Stan found the gun empty. He tossed it to the cot disgustedly.

"Wouldn't keep no loaded gun near to my own mama," Sam sneered. "'Sides, you didn't have no chance. Had my hand on a button under the desk, sounds an alarm that could wake a stiff in the next county. No hard feelin's, I like your guts. Now sit down there and make up that check."

Stan shrugged. He sank into the chair and wrote the check.

"Time's runnin' out," said Sam, tucking the check into a pocket. "C'mon, back to the cage, big bird."

Another day limped by, spaced-only with the serving of meals which were neither good nor bad, merely tasteless. Logically, night would follow dinner, though there was no other mark of its coming but for Sam's watch and the erasure of cell lights at nine.

The day had been like all the others. Hamlin had not once appeared, even to gloat. Nor had his deputies, Floyd and Bart, been seen, though in the first two nights they had occasionally passed by the cell door, escorting well-groomed, harried prisoners of both sexes.

Following blackout, Stan fell asleep at once. He awoke after what seemed hours later, though morning had not yet been signaled by the harsh glare of overhead light. Restless, he lay on his back, staring inward at the tangled web of his thoughts. Oddly, when he heard the sound, he was involved with the absurd problem of trying to remember the precise color of Barbara's eyes. Was it possible that he really didn't know?

The sound was created by the stealthy opening of the cell door. He glanced up in time to see Kinard make a slithering entrance as Sam departed, locking the door with no more than a feeble snick of metal-on-metal. Stan bounced off the bunk. Startled, Kinard paused abruptly, recoiling.

"Where you been?" Stan murmured, though he knew all too well.

"I—I had a powwow with Sam," Kinard low-voiced back. "I wanted him to get word out we were being held without process."

"Yeah? What'd he say?"

"Said no dice. Too big a risk."

"And that was when you wrote the check, huh?"

"What check?"

"You're a nice guy, Dennis, but you're also a lousy liar."

As if in confession, Dennis sat wearily on Stan's bunk and began to dry-wash his hands.

"When did you get the pitch? When he took you to the shower?"

In the gloom, Kinard's head bobbed affirmatively.

"And then he told you to keep your mouth shut to me or he'd slam the gate. Right?"

Kinard turned with a sad little smile of resignation. "I see you went the same route," he muttered.

"We've been taken!" Stan said, his voice rising recklessly. "Taken right along with every other sucker they scooped off the road into this sweatbox!"

"Yeah," said Kinard. "That does seem to be the way it is. What do we do now?"

"What do we do? What *can* we do? We sit and wait for them to deal the next card."

"Eventually they'll have to let us go," Kinard said weakly. "Won't they?"

"'Eventually' could be six months. And when you come right down to it, why would they let us go at any time; under any circumstance you could name? We know too much and we're too many to be denied. Also, there'd be evidence in the form of canceled checks. Even the fact that we've been missing backs our story. By now, we're those people who mysteriously disappeared on the road south. They'll be combing the country for us."

"Still," Kinard said, "they don't really have any other choice but to let us go. Either they release us or they—"

"Or they what, Dennis? You're a crooked cop involved in a game of extortion so dirty you could be sent up for life if a sharp D.A. can build this into a kidnap-and-hold-for-ransom sort of crime. It certainly comes down to kidnapping—we simply paid our own ransom. All right, so what do you do with these so-called honest and reliable citizens who will pop up to accuse you if you turn them loose?"

"Well," Kinard replied, his horrified expression apparent even in the dusky cell, "I—I'd rather not answer that question, if you don't mind."

"You already have," Stan told him.

The next five days were the more terrifying because they passed in an electric vacuum of insinuation, unrelieved by a single hint of what was to come. For a day and a night, Sam vanished and was replaced by Bart. Then it was four days of Silent Sam, for he answered no questions and made no response to the accusations hurled at him by a half-dozen voices echoing up and down the corridor.

He poked food on plastic trays through the slots without a word, his face a stony etching in frame for a moment before it slid from sight, not to be seen again until the next meal.

Then, on the fifth day since Stan discovered the plot, Sam did not appear with the evening meal. Even when the cell lights winked out, not a tray had been delivered. Nor was Sam to be seen at his usual perch at the end of the corridor, shotgun leaning against the wall beside him as he smoked an endless chain of cigarettes.

Sam exchanged speculations with Kinard, both shouted from the cell door and were answered only by calls from other cells, one of them identified as belonging to Barbara, fear-choked and hysterical. At last all sounds died an unnatural death and there was nothing but the distant throb of what Stan had recently decided was a gasoline-powered generator.

When even that sound halted abruptly, all lights went out. There was a period of wall-pounding, door-rattling panic among the prisoners, followed by a still more startling silence.

"Don't you get it?" said Stan to Kinard, who was foolishly shouldering the cell door. "They've gone. They've all gone."

"You mean," said Kinard in an awed tone, "they've just gone off and left us locked up to starve and die?"

"Exactly," said Stan, experiencing a deep melancholy. With Barbara only a few feet removed down the corridor, he might never reach her. He stepped to the door beside Kinard and shouted, "Don't panic, Barbara! Keep calm. We'll find a way out!"

There was no reply but he heard a muffled sob. Wretched, he left the door and sprawled upon his bunk. Kinard came to sit woodenly at his feet.

After a minute he sniffed and said, "Do you smell smoke?"

Stan lifted his head and took a breath. "No, same stale air, but no smoke. The only thing on fire is your imagination."

"Perhaps," said Kinard. "Just the same, I did smell smoke and I wouldn't put it past them. Burn us to ashes, make it seem an accidental fire. Don't you see, it's the perfect answer!" His voice rose in tremulous alarm.

Stan was forced to take another sniff of air. Now was it *his* imagination, or did he also smell smoke?

"Smoke or not," he said, "don't go yelling 'fire.' These people would kill each other trying to break out."

"It's getting colder," Kinard grumbled. "They cut the heat so we'd freeze to death, and perhaps it didn't occur to you, Stan, but we're all gonna die in darkness. Whatever happens, we'll never know night from day."

"Ah, shut up, Kinard. You're getting on my nerves."

Folding his arms across himself to keep warm, Stan closed his eyes. Surprisingly, he slept. How long? Was it a minute, or an hour? Something

had awakened him, a sound he couldn't place. Then there was a distinct jangle of metal on the cell floor which he recognized instantly. He bounced up, colliding with Kinard, who was descending from the top bunk.

He stooped and felt around the floor. -He came up with a large key in his fist. Pushing his arm through the door window and groping down, he was able to insert the key and twist. The cell door opened.

"It's over, Dennis," he said quietly. "We're free."

He retrieved the key and, clutching Kinard by the arm, maneuvered up the corridor toward the front of the building. "We've got to find a light of some kind," he said at the connecting door between cellblock and office. "Even a match would help."

He found the door unlocked and shoved it open. They were greeted by the soft glow of a kerosene lantern atop Hamlin's desk. It cast flickering shadows about the empty room.

"Nice touch," Kinard muttered. "At the last second they went all soft and poured the milk of human kindness."

"Probably," Stan sneered, "it was Sam on the run. He just forgot his little old lantern, that's all."

They found nothing in the desks, not a scrap of paper in the filing cabinet. A heavy locker stood open, vacant, but on a table, coats and gloves had been piled. Even Barbara's expensive mink, by a fathomless quirk of human nature, had been left behind.

Stan went outside and peered into the darkness. The area was remote, surrounded by woods. In the distance, he could see a crumbling barn and a broken shack. He circled the building and returned. "It's nothing but a deserted farm," he reported. "Bunch of phony cops. They got away with everything—cars and all. We're on foot."

"Never mind," Kinard replied. "We're free!" He sounded almost happy.

Stan caught up the lantern. "C'mon, let's go turn the captives loose!"

They stood beneath the cold glitter of stars, six men and five women grouped together in the winter darkness, Stan holding the lantern and hugging Barbara against him as they stared at the shadowy substation. The building appeared small and bleak and abandoned.

"We ought to burn it down," said Howard Stoneman, the falsely accused hit-run driver.

"No," Stan objected, "we'd only be burning evidence. And we'd be like the very animals we'll be hunting."

"Police'll handle this," Dennis said, "if we can find a real cop within a hundred miles."

"How far is it to town?" asked Stoneman.

"Sam said three miles, once we reach the highway," Stan replied. "If he wasn't lying, it should be about four miles and a half from this point to town."

"A miserable hike in this weather," Kinard groaned to himself.

"I'll never make it in high heels," a woman whined.

"You'll make it if I have to carry you the whole way," a man answered.

"Well, then, let's get moving," said Stan.

Inside the ancient barn the bogus Sheriff Hamlin and his three accomplices, Floyd, Bart and Sam, stood in darkness, squinting out through the cracked, decaying boards. Their uniforms had been replaced by the overalls and jackets they wore when "police" operations were suspended. Presently, Hamlin was watching the receding glimmer of the lantern and beside him, greedy Sam was asking about the take.

"I got it all figured in my head," Hamlin announced. "Sixty grand from the six checks Sam got cleared through the bank, fifty-eight hundred cash if you include the traveler's checks we can forge. Watches, rings, and assorted other loot come to about five big ones when you knock it down to what a fence will give us for the stuff."

"All told, less the rent on this beat-up farm, better than seventy grand, I'd say. Took nine days, so that's right on to eight grand a day."

"Man, them's swee-eet pickin's!" Sam exclaimed joyously.

"Too bad we can't unload them big, shiny heaps," Floyd grumbled. "That would bring it close to a hundred grand, I reckon."

"Too risky," Hamlin said. "It's not our line, hot cars."

"Sure hate to just leave 'em here in the barn," said Bart woefully. "They'll come back and find 'em, sure enough."

"Only wanted to give us a little extra time by keepin' them suckers afoot; first place," Hamlin muttered. He stared out into the darkness where the lantern shimmered once more and vanished around a bend in the road.

"Okay," he said. "They're outta sight and you could bet your last buck it'll take at least a couple hours 'fore they can shoo the law down here."

from that three-cop town. By then we'll be in the next state. So hop to it—let's roll it!"

The barn door was heaved wide, and Floyd drove out the fake patrol car, stripped of its markings. Sam closed the barn door and hopped in with the others. Then Floyd headed toward the sham substation where Hamlin ordered a halt. Sam went inside with a flashlight. Shortly he returned.

"Clean as a hound's tooth," he reported. "We didn't leave a clue nowhere." He paused. "That there is a nice, cozy little jail we done builded up. Darn shame—all that work for nothin'."

Hamlin snorted. "You call seventy grand nothin'? Sides, we can fake up any little ole house into another jail."

"C'mon, roll it, Floyd! Plenty more hayseed counties and city suckers just waitin' to be plucked."



We're Really Not That Kind of People

by Samuel W. Taylor

It was on a Sunday afternoon, I remembered, that Blackie was poisoned. I remembered that the morning had been cold, with a high fog, as it can be in the San Francisco Bay region even in mid-summer. Peggy and I had invited the deKadts over for a picnic barbecue, and the anticipation of the event was a big thing for our eight-year-old, Sue. Sue was disappointed as only an eight-year-old can be, at the prospect of having the barbecue inside. But then the fog burned off about noon, I remembered, and it was just right for the barbecue, not hot, not cold, the kind of a day on which we Californians like tourists to arrive. ("Nice day?" we say casually. "Hadn't noticed. It's like this all the time.")

Lucille and Carl deKadt were our neighbors across the grapestake fence to the south. They made a good pair; Carl was slow, plump, and easy-going, while Lucille was a slender, hard-driving redhead—pretty too, though personally I go more for a girl like Peggy, with a little more meat on the bones and a disposition that allows you to relax occasionally.

Carl and Lucille brought Hérb Berry to the barbecue. Herb was Carl's cousin, down from Sacramento for the weekend. Herb was down pretty often, but not, I figured, to see Carl; Lucille was a terrific cook, and Herb was both a big guy with a hearty appetite and a bachelor.

After eating, I went across the grapestake fence for a game of horseshoes, Lucille and I standing Herb and Carl. We were tied at 12-all, when Sue came through the gate.

"Daddy, Blackie's sick," the child said. "Mommy wants you to come look at him."

"Okay, soon as we finish the game."

Lucille and I were leading, 18-16, when Peggy came to the fence. "George, I think you'd better come and look at Blackie." There was a quiet urgency to her voice; so I left without finishing the game.

Blackie was lying in his corner of the carport. He was a small dog, part

poodle and part wirehair; ugly enough to be cute. He lay there panting, and every little while he would twitch and moan a little. He had been chewing his tongue.

When I got the dog down to the animal hospital on El Camino, the vet shook his head. "Nothing can be done. We'll make him comfortable."

We'd had Blackie since before Sue was born. I let out a long, weary sigh. "I'll stay," I said.

I didn't get home until past ten o'clock. When I came in, Peggy met my eye, then ducked her head. I began to swear, which is a man's impotent reaction to a woman's tears. "I'd just like to know who would do a trick like that!"

"No, George," Peggy said. "We don't want to know."

Maybe she was right; Peggy generally was. We didn't want to know who such people were. People like us didn't want to think such people existed. Blackie had been a friendly little dog; it had been impossible to keep him in shape, because everybody in the neighborhood fed him.

Next morning we told Sue that Blackie must have been hit by a car. Peggy and I decided we didn't want another dog; not for awhile, anyhow, and particularly not if there was a poisoner in the neighborhood. Maybe, we thought, we'd get a kitten for Sue. A cat would take care of the gophers that kept making mounds in Peggy's flower beds.

Looking back, thinking about it as I lay awake nights, I figured that poisoning the dog was the first step in the plan to kill me. But if anyone had told me such a thing, at the time, I would have laughed in his face. Who, me? What had I ever done, to make somebody want to murder me? What could anyone conceivably gain by my death? It was preposterous. Things like that didn't happen to managers of the local units of Fit-All Shoe Stores. I wasn't chasing anybody else's wife. I didn't play the ponies or hit the bottle. I wasn't involved in the sort of things that can lead to violence, and I didn't even know the sort of people who were. George Granger, 1138 College Avenue, Woodside Heights, was just another guy in the row, having a nice wife and a healthy mortgage; one child and a nervous septic tank; paying on a car, furniture, refrigerator, power mower, insurance and dental bills; a couple of E bonds tucked away and gophers in the petunias—there were a thousand like me in Woodside Heights alone. People don't go around murdering average guys.

But what if it wasn't me at all, but Peggy who was the intended victim?

Quiet, lovely Peggy—oh, but that was crazy. Of course it was crazy, and that's what kept me awake nights. Perhaps it was even Sue who was the intended victim. What insane person might be plotting the death of your wife or an eight-year-old child? I would lie there remembering every little detail, trying to pick out the significant thing that might help in meeting this situation.

I remembered that when I got home Saturday, Peggy told me that Lucille had finally got Carl started on painting their house. Lucille had been at him for a year or more about it, but easy-going Carl could be stubborn when it came to unnecessary exertion. He didn't get much done, Peggy said. Every time she looked across the grapestake fence, she'd see Carl taking his ease atop the ladder, leisurely smoking a cigarette while gently stirring the bucket of paint.

"Not a hair out of place, shoes shined, trousers pressed," Peggy said, laughing. "Lucille spent more energy keeping him at it than he put into the painting. She'll never change that guy. Why does she keep trying?"

Carl was a pretty good insurance man. He had an air of calm confidence, coupled with an utter lack of a sense of humor, which enabled him to deliver a fund of bromides and platitudes with sincerity. He didn't have much push, but Lucille had enough for both of them; she kept a record of his calls, and saw to it that he made them.

"Lucille ought to get Herb to come down to help," I said, "or Carl can take all summer on that job."

"She said something's wrong with Herb's car. He's coming later on the bus."

Herb Berry arrived that evening, and Lucille drove in to the bus station in the VW to bring him out. "With Herb here, they'll finish the house tomorrow," Peggy said. Herb was a big guy who liked exercise, but didn't get much chance for it. Ten years ago or so he'd been a professional baseball player, and had spent a couple of seasons in the big leagues. Now he was in real estate at Sacramento.

Next morning they were at work before sunup. I heard them banging away with scaffolds and buckets while we were in bed, their voices clear and strident in the quiet of the morning. By the time we sat down to breakfast, they had painted almost the entire side of the house which faced us across the grapestake fence. Carl's blond hair was mussed now, and he was splattered with paint, trying to keep up with Herb and Lucille. She was on the scaffold with the two men, slapping on paint.

I was pouring coffee when Herb Berry let out a yell, and I looked up just as the tall man took a header off the scaffold with the main paint bucket in his hand. Lucille screamed. Then Herb stood up into view with paint on him from head to foot, and began laughing. At this point, I realized I'd poured coffee onto Peggy's clean tablecloth.

"On you it looks good!" I called out the window to Herb.

He climbed onto the scaffold and began rubbing himself on the side of the house, using his clothing and hair as a paint brush. Carl howled with laughter. Lucille told Carl to go downtown for some more paint—they carried it at the Plaza drugstore which would be open on Sunday—while she washed the paint out of Herb's hair.

A bit later Carl came over. "My VW won't start," he said. "Can I borrow your car to run downtown?"

I gave him the keys. "This will teach you to get one of those foreign jobs."

"But it never happened before; she just won't start."

He turned to the carport, and I went back to breakfast. I remembered that I picked up the coffee cup as he slammed the car door. I took a sip and was putting the cup down, when there was a big grunt and something shoved me. It was like being caught in an ocean breaker. The table was picked up and flung upside down across the room, and I remembered seeing the coffee maker narrowly miss Peggy's head as she fell backwards. I was thrown against the stove with my heels higher than my head. Every window of the kitchen was blown out, the roof lifted so a rim of daylight showed around it, and the entire wall adjoining the carport was sprung inwards. But for all that, Sue sat exactly where she had been, her spoon raised half to her mouth. An explosion can do freak things, and it had completely passed the child by.

My memory isn't too clear about the next few minutes. I was pretty groggy, and my ears rang. Peggy helped me up, and there was a line of blood beginning to run down her cheek (only a scratch; boy, were we lucky). From outside came shouts and running feet as the neighbors gathered. Then somebody began shaking the kitchen door, but the explosion had jammed it shut.

"Are you all right in there, George?" It was Bert Miles' round face and heavy shock of curly hair at the window. He was our neighbor on the other side.

"I guess so. How are you, Peggy?"

Peggy seemed very young at the moment. She was like the slim girl with the brown hair and the big grey eyes who sat beside me a full quarter in Psychology 61 (we were seated alphabetically; her name was Grove, mine Granger) before I scraped up enough courage to ask her for a date. "I'm all right," she said to Bert Miles. "And thank heavens Sue wasn't even—"

"They're okay in here," Bert Miles called. "George and Peggy and Sue."

"George and Peggy and Sue?" someone asked. "Then who was in the car when she blew up? Who got blasted to pieces?"

And then, from somewhere, I heard Lucille scream, "Carl!"

The casket was closed at the funeral. I guess there wasn't much left of the mortal remains of Carl deKadt. Mr. Wheeler of the sheriff's office, who investigated, had decided that a bundle of dynamite had been placed under the front seat, wired to the starter. Carl got in, slammed the door, inserted the key, turned it on to engage the starter, and had been killed instantly. At least he didn't suffer. Poor Carl. And but for chance, I thought, as they lowered his casket into the grave, there go I. It wasn't intended for him. Thank you, Carl, but why did it have to be?

This is the sort of thing that can interfere with your sleep. In another couple of hours we would have gone out to the car, Peggy, Sue, and I, all dressed up for Sunday school. Except that Lucille had finally gotten Carl started on the painting, except that Herb's car was in the garage and that Carl's VW wouldn't start, except that Herb had fallen off the scaffold with the paint so that Carl borrowed my Dodge to get some more . . .

On the way home from the funeral Peggy suddenly said, "That's why Blackie was poisoned. They got rid of the dog, so they could fix our car in the night while we slept."

I drove back rapidly, wondering about Sue, whom we'd left with a sitter. It was good to find the child all right.

This was something that had been planned ahead. No telling what would happen next.

The following day, Peggy went to town and got another dog, a small, excitable type of mutt such as Blackie had been. Sue was delighted with the new pet, particularly delighted that this was a dog we could have in the house. We had a reason for that. A dog in the house can't be poisoned at night.

Next day I got a letter at the store. It had been mailed locally. The envelope looked like something Sue might have done with scissors and paste, my name and address composed of printed letters and numbers cut from a newspaper. The note inside was the same sort of a paste-up. It said:

You were lucky. But next time it will be you and your wife and kid.

Mr. Wheeler of the sheriff's office said he doubted that another attempt would be made in the same manner. He was a lean man with four of his front teeth forming a bridge, and not too good a one. He had a habit of eating soda mint tablets and a passion for questions that might very well uncover a motive for someone wanting to kill me.

But I told him a dozen times, "There isn't any motive. It's a crazy person. Goofy. Nuts. An oddball character."

Mr. Wheeler kept saying he doubted it, and kept popping soda mint tablets into his mouth. "Give it some thought, Mr. Granger. This is not a crime of impulse. Someone has a very good reason."

Fathead! My estimate, at the moment, of Mr. Wheeler.

Have you ever had your picture on the front page and seen your name in a newspaper streamer? Have you been pointed out on the street, pestered by busy-bodies, avoided by people who don't want to get too close until the dust settles? Have you ever had the feeling of standing apart, thinking that this guy isn't you, can't be you, because he isn't that sort of a guy and just doesn't fit the part?

But it was real enough. Particularly at night, when you woke up.

The workmen were repairing the house. I had to deal with the insurance people about this and about getting another car. It was enough to interfere with anybody's sleep. And as I lay awake in the night, I thought back over every detail of what had happened, and back and back into the past trying to get hold of something that could have made it happen. Everybody has enemies, Mr. Wheeler had said. Everybody has something another person wants, or wanted. Everybody has hurt somebody.

Tom Stone? He had been my rival for Peggy, and it had been a pretty bitter competition. Tom had threatened to get me, if it was the last thing he ever did. But he'd also promised to wait for Peggy, and he'd married Alice Duke within six months. That was eleven years ago; Tom and Alice now had four kids.

Henry Traut had been assistant manager of the first Fit-All Store I worked in, and I'll never forget his sly grin the night he showed me how

to beat the store. With two of us working together, he said, we could clean up. When I turned down the proposition, I knew he was out to get me. He turned in bad reports to the boss about me, yet somehow I couldn't bring myself to squeal on him. I was thinking of quitting, when Traut was caught with his hand in the till. He swore he'd get me for squealing on him, but that was a long time ago, back before I got married—in fact, I proposed to Peggy on the strength of getting Traut's job. Could a thing like that fester this long? I'd never seen Traut since he was fired.

At the local store, I'd finally had to lower the boom on one of the most respectable housewives in town, Lydia Primrose, whose husband was on the city council, because of shoplifting. I didn't see why I should outfit her family with free shoes. The thing was settled quietly, but certainly both she and her husband would be glad if I were dead.

There had been a few hassles at the service club, where I was chairman of the committee of admissions. In particular, I had kept Phil Buckwalter out of the club year after year, despite his prominence, wealth, influence, and driving desire to be a member, and despite charges that I was acting from personal spite and malice. The plain fact was that Buckwalter's place of business was a clip joint, something which I couldn't prove nor openly charge, but which made me keep him out of the club, one way or another.

Lying awake nights, if you put your mind to it, it's amazing to find how many toes you've stepped on. Slights, affronts, arguments, flareups. Things you quickly put from mind, until you're digging back through memory in search of someone who let it fester.

The fellow businessmen who dropped by to say hello, the members of the Main Street Improvement Association, the people who came to my church, the associates in the service club, the neighbors—they didn't know that every time I said hello I wondered, is this the one? The cashier of the lunch counter, the janitor of the building, my bookkeeper, assistant manager, clerks—some one of you is out to kill me and my family. Mr. Wheeler of the sheriff's office was trying to find out why. Hell, all I cared about was who. I'd find out why later.

I'd had a little hassle with the guy across the street, who had a habit of backing out of his driveway into mine, to make his turn into the narrow street easier. I didn't mind his backing into the driveway, but I did object to him missing it and running over my ivy; so Fred Lacey and I had had words. I'd run over the cat of a guy who used to live down the block, and

that had caused words. Could it have grown with him, even though he'd moved away and I'd forgotten his name? And of course we hadn't spoken to Loris Neilsson, since he'd threatened to shoot Blackie for walking on his new lawn; but, then, nobody in the neighborhood spoke to Loris.

These things couldn't grow to premeditated murder. Or could they? From what I'd read, most people got killed over small things—a slight, an argument, loss of face, an affront, avarice over a few dollars. Looking at it that way, there might be many people plotting my death, including Peggy, who might do it for the insurance.

Peggy wasn't getting her sleep, either. Her face got drawn and her big grey eyes bigger. We'd tried to keep it from Sue, but once it hit the headlines she got it from her playmates. What was it like for her, knowing someone was plotting her death, or the death of her mother and father? Childhood is filled with terrors anyhow.

"George, I just don't know what to do," Peggy said, speaking quietly as we both lay awake in the night.

"I've put in for a transfer. It shouldn't be hard; a lot of managers are anxious to get a store in California."

"What will this do to your advancement?"

It wouldn't help it. "I don't think that's the important thing, right now." She said, "You should withdraw that application. Really you—"

"Honey, I'm no hero. I just want to walk away from this."

"But here at least we are among people we know. And all the people here are thinking, wondering who's doing this."

"Sure—and one of them *knows*."

"And the police. They're working on it—the sheriff's office out here, the city police because you got the letter at the store in town, and now it's a Federal case because they used the mails. This is our protection, George, to be here where so many are helping. It's all we've got. We simply have to hold faith in it."

"Okay," I said. "I'll withdraw the application."

She was right. And, come right down to it, there was no such thing as running away from this.

We adapted, as best we could. I came home each day for lunch, just to check up, instead of eating in town. Sue no longer rode the school bus. Peggy took her to school and picked her up. I had my deer rifle loaded and ready, on the shelf of the entry hall closet. Sue, I noticed, no longer watched the horse operas, whodunits, and other shows of vio-

lence on TV which she had been so fascinated with just a week ago. I don't know whether it was because they were a pale comparison with the real thing, or whether the child was too edgy to want to be reminded of the real thing; a kid won't tell what's eating her.

When I arrived home for lunch Saturday, neighbors were milling about the house, everybody talking about the poisoned chocolates. "I told Peggy not to worry you over the phone," Lucille said. The newly-widowed redhead looked bad. Lucille was the nervous type anyhow, who took everything big, and she'd been living on coffee and cigarettes for the six days since Carl had been killed. Tragedy had stalked her. Lucille's first husband had been killed in a car wreck; her second had been shot while deer hunting; and now Carl—all three killed accidentally. I felt awfully sorry for her, Carl dying with the bomb intended for me.

The neighbors filled me in about the chocolates, talking all at once. Peggy had been helping Lucille sort the contents of Lucille's house. There were things the moving van would take to Sacramento, where Herb Berry had gotten her a job in the office of the real estate outfit where he worked; there was stuff for the Goodwill truck; there were things that would go with the house, which Lucille had put up for sale; and there was just a lot of accumulated junk that had to be sorted out and hauled to the county dump.

The two women had taken a mid-morning break and were having a cup of coffee at my place when the mail arrived. There was a package addressed like the anonymous letter had been, a paste-up of printed characters cut from a newspaper. Lucille had warned Peggy not even to open it, fearing a bomb or something. She'd called Mr. Wheeler at the sheriff's office, who had come out and taken the package. Just before I got home for lunch, he'd phoned that it contained chocolates filled with lead arsenate, the stuff used to spray trees.

I phoned Wheeler myself, and he didn't seem too excited. "A clumsy attempt," he said professionally. This was all in the day's work for him. "The address being the same style as the poison pen note—and you should have seen those chocolates, all gooed up, the white powder spilling out of some of them—it wouldn't have fooled a baby."

"Great deduction," I said acidly. "But what if Peggy had been over to Lucille's, and Sue had opened the package? The kid would be dead by now!"

"There's no use shouting, Mr. Granger," he advised me.

Fatheads, incompetents, parasites on the public purse. I told him exactly what I thought of him and the entire sheriff's office, after, of course, I had hung up.

This was like life in the jungle. You never went downwind. You approached each thicket with the expectation that it might contain an ambush.

Trouble was, I wasn't used to the jungle. I didn't know how to survive in it.

Herb Berry arrived from Sacramento in the afternoon, to help Lucille with the packing. Since her house was torn up, they came over to our place for dinner. And he spent the night with us. It was good to have Herb around. He was a big guy, a former athlete, plenty husky and capable. He'd taken care of all the funeral arrangements and estate details for Lucille.

After Sue was in bed, I broke out a bottle and we relaxed. We all needed it. I took a couple too many, as a matter of fact, and it was wonderful to feel great and not to give a damn, even if it would mean a hangover in the morning. I hadn't realized that Herb could be such a clown when he got a snootful, and Lucille really let loose for once. She'd had her cry, and now she was breaking the tension with a laugh. When the redhead and the big ex-baseball player got into high gear, I laughed until my ribs hurt. Peggy didn't really enjoy the time we were having for ourselves, but then she never takes more than one drink. Personally, I was glad to see Lucille unwind after the tragedy. She'd been keyed up like a fiddle string, and I'd been afraid she'd snap.

Next morning I was over helping Lucille and Herb with the packing, when Peggy called from the grapestake fence. She and Sue were going to Sunday school, and she'd left the sprinkler on the petunias. Would I turn it off in fifteen minutes?

Okay, I told her. But I forgot the water until an hour or so later. Oh, well, it wouldn't hurt the petunias to get a good soaking.

While I was at the house, I decided to warm up the coffee from breakfast. I felt pretty rocky from the night before. I turned the gas on under the coffee, then looked for last night's paper, which I hadn't had a chance to read yet. Peggy never let papers lie around, and sure enough I found it in the wastebasket. I took it out, opened it, and a shower of paper bits fluttered to the floor like confetti. Somebody had been whacking at the paper with a pair of scissors. It looked like something a kid would do,

just to be cutting, but I knew it wasn't Sue, and it wasn't just to be cutting.

The newspaper had been uncut at breakfast. I'd been hoping to look at it while Herb was shaving, but Lucille had come over just then. The paper hadn't been cut until after I went with Lucille and Herb to help with the packing. All at once I knew. Peggy had done it.

The last person in the world. The very last person. Peggy. Why? Insurance? A boy friend? What? Romance with the choir leader at church? Clandestine meetings at the supermarket, wandering down the aisles with their carts? Stolen kisses behind the door of the Sunday school classroom, assignations in the poison oak and redwoods of the hills? Oh, it was possible. Love will find a way. But it didn't fit Peggy, not at all.

Or did it?

What did I know about Peggy, really? What does any man know about his wife? She was sweet, she was lovely—okay, but so were wives who had affairs and laced the morning coffee of their husbands with arsenic. No husband would ever be poisoned, or done in by his wife's lover, if he suspected such a thing might happen.

There was a sudden hiss as the coffee pot boiled over. *Peggy*. I poured myself a cup. *Peggy*. Then as I took a mouthful of the scalding stuff, it woke me up. I put the newspaper in the wastebasket and went across the grapestake fence to help Lucille and Herb with the packing.

They were in the attic, sorting things. I worked downstairs. I was putting the pictures from the living room walls into a box when the doorbell rang. "Will you get it, George?" Lucille called from the attic.

"Okay." I went to the front door.

"Special delivery for Mr. Herbert Berry."

"I'll give it to him."

The letter was addressed with characters cut from a newspaper and pasted on the envelope. It had been mailed locally; the postmark was not an hour old. Peggy had mailed it, I knew, on the way to Sunday school. But why to Herb?

"Bring it up, will you, George?" Herb's voice asked from overhead. He'd heard, then. I'd have to give it to him. Well, why not? He didn't know about Peggy; only I knew.

I went into the back hall, up the stepladder and through the trap-door into the attic. Herb and Lucille were over in a corner, sorting the contents of a trunk.

"Maybe the boss has sold that Gresham property," Herb said. His big hand reached for the envelope, then froze as he saw the way it was addressed. Lucille sucked in her breath sharply, plainly more high strung than ever. Slowly they looked at each other, their faces a dead white—Herb's beard black in contrast, Lucille's freckles standing out sharply.

Suddenly she snatched the envelope, ripped it open and unfolded the letter within. "It's a lie!" she cried.

Herb's voice was tightly hoarse. "Who sent it?"

"Peggy—who else?" Lucille said. So she knew. Soon it would be headlines for everybody to know—wife plots husband's death. "Peggy knew about us," Lucille was saying. "Carl was a trusting oaf. George here couldn't guess. Men are fools. But you can't trick a woman about something like that. If Peggy didn't know before, she could see it last night, when we drank too much," Lucille said to Herb. "She knows how we feel about each other."

I saw it then. The whole thing.

"Shut up, you fool!" Herb grabbed her shoulders, and I knew it wasn't the first time he'd laid his big paws on her. Herb Berry hadn't been making those weekend trips from Sacramento just for Lucille's cooking. Why had I been so blind? A real estate man's best time is the weekend; he does most of his business on Saturdays and Sundays.

"Keep your mouth shut!" Herb warned her.

"If she knows, *he* knows," Lucille snapped. "They're married." Angrily, she tossed the letter spinning to the floor.

I saw the message, pasted from newspaper letters: *Carl was her third husband. You're next, chump.*

"They cooked this up together!" Lucille shrieked at Herb.

Herb turned to me. I hadn't realized, really, what an enormous guy he was. He was a full head taller, and he would outweigh me by almost a hundred pounds.

"How about it, buster?" he asked me.

I could have told him everything, right then, Carl deKadt had been an insurance man, and an insurance man is always his own best customer. They'd killed him for the insurance. The bomb in the car never was intended for me. It was like the first letter and the poisoned chocolates, to make it appear that I was the intended victim, to make Carl's death seem merely an accident. Everything had been planned—Blackie's death,

Herb falling off the scaffold, the VW that wouldn't start. The chocolates never were intended to harm us. The paste-up address was warning enough, and in addition they were clumsily prepared, the lead arsenate spilling out of them. And Lucille had been on deck when they were delivered, just in case.

It was all so clear, but, confronted with the big man, I said, "I don't know what you're talking about, Herb."

"They know," he said to her. It must have showed on my face. "I told you something would happen!" he yelled at her.

Lucille, who tipped the beam at 102, was the strong one now. "Okay, and what can they prove?" she told the big guy towering over her. "There are lots of things that people know that they don't talk about." She indicated me. "Remind him not to talk, Herb. Give him a lesson he won't forget in a hurry. Let him know we're playing for keeps."

It was somehow hard to believe even as I eased around among the boxes and trunks, ducked behind a stack of old newspapers, slipped to the sewing machine, sprang to the dress form, darted to the wood-burning stove, that Herb Berry was implacably pursuing me, his long arms spread wide, herding me toward a corner. Herb was a friend. My association with him had involved playing horseshoes, eating barbecued steaks, sharing tall drinks, spinning yarns. Just the night before we'd had a hilarious evening together over a bottle. He'd slept overnight as my guest. And now he was pursuing me, heading me back into a corner of the attic as I darted from one thing to another among the accumulated junk.

He had been a professional athlete, and he was relaxed now as an athlete is, waiting for his chance, while I spent myself rushing about. Peggy of course had no way of knowing that her little trick, done all on her own, would lead to this. All she had undoubtedly intended was getting a couple of murderers out of our hair. I tensed, knowing that when Herb made his move, it would count.

I wasn't going to be trapped in that corner. But when I made my break he was expecting it, and he lunged for me with that swift ease of the athlete. I knew I couldn't make that trapdoor. And then I did the sort of thing I used to do as a youngster, the last trick of a kid pursued by a bigger kid. I flung sideways to the floor, sticking out a leg to trip him.

His big foot kicked into my calf, and I thought my leg was broken. He yelled, then, a single hoarse shriek, as he sprawled toward the open trapdoor. I heard him crash into the stepladder below, and then hit the

floor with a sodden thud. I crawled to the trapdoor. When I looked down from the rim, I just felt, judging from the way he was lying, that he must be dead.

Kneeling beside him was Mr. Wheeler of the sheriff's office, and I was also surprised to see the two uniformed men who were below in the hallway. "Lucky I wasn't climbing that ladder when he dived through," Mr. Wheeler said. He arose, and put a soda mint into his mouth. "That saves the state the expense of a trial for one of them." He looked up. "The woman's up there?"

"Yes," I said.

"What people won't do for money: You've got a smart wife, Mr. Graner. When she phoned this morning that the pair of them were in love, it straightened out my thinking. The whole thing came in focus—make us look at you while they walked away with the loot. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm okay," I said.

At least, I thought I was.



Weighty Problem

by Duane Decker

Fatstuff could feel with his fingers that the material of the suit the nurse had brought him was corduroy. That meant it was not *his* suit.

"There has been a mistake," he said, in an annoyed voice. "These are not my clothes."

"That's true," she said. "But yours were badly ripped by your accident. These will have to do until you can buy others. Courtesy, by the way, of the Salvation Army."

"Oh!" Fatstuff said, mollified now. "And when will the bandages be removed from my eyes?"

"As soon as the doctor arrives," she explained. "And he's due quite soon."

"Good," he said. "I guess I'll wait and put the clothes on after I can see what I'm doing."

He leaned back against the upraised head of the hospital bed. He could remember his accident vividly. Late that morning he'd headed across the meadow behind Bertha's house. He knew what had been his undoing: he'd taken three stiff slugs of rye to build courage, then walked into a terribly hot sun. In his physically run-down condition that had been bad.

Far across the meadow, at the edge of the woods, he'd reached the dried-up well—the place where he'd hidden the money many weeks before. He had put the money inside a galvanized pail which was now resting on the dry bottom of the well.

In his hand he held a wire coat hanger with the triangular part flattened together so that it resembled a hook at the end of a long cucumber. At the top of the cucumber he had tied a length of cord. It formed a simple, home-made tool designed to be jockeyed back and forth below—until the hook managed to catch underneath the arched handle of the pail. Then Fatstuff could draw up the pail and remove the money—all thirty thousand of it.

But when he reached the well, the hot sun and the rye and his emaciated body had suddenly taken toll. Just before he fainted and blacked out, he remembered banging his head and body against the rough cement exterior of the well.

Now, glancing at the clock over the entrance to the hospital ward, Fatstuff saw it was almost five o'clock. That meant he had already lost six hours and that Bertha was no doubt pacing the bus station in Pomeroy, suspicion growing in her mind that he had skipped out on her with the money. If she got angry, vindictive—well, she could make a phone call and have the police come down on Fatstuff. He had to get out of here in a hurry, get the money and meet Bertha at the Pomeroy bus station before she ran out of patience.

He spoke to the nurse. "How did I get here in the first place?"

"A hunter happened to come along. He found you unconscious. And he half-carried you, half-dragged you to his car. That's how your clothes got ruined. Then he drove you here, to the emergency entrance."

Well, he could bless the hunter. He could think back so clearly—see how this whole thing had gone wrong from the start. Even though it still wasn't too late. The money was still there, waiting for him—and only for him—to pick up.

The start of it had been all right. He'd been on the bum, hitchhiking his way to New York. Months ago. At dusk he'd found himself on the outskirts of this one-horse town, Appleton.

Farmhouse lights set back a hundred yards from the Post Road had cheerily beckoned him. Bertha answered his knock. She invited him in, asked him to dinner, suggested later that he stay over and get a good night's sleep. And he needed it.

Bértha, it developed, was a poor and lonely widow with nothing to her name except a termite-ridden farmhouse. Fatstuff, however, gladly stayed with her for a week. Then, once she trusted him, she told him of the scheme she'd worked out long ago, waiting for the right partner.

She explained that up the Post Road, a quarter of a mile, there was a small dirt road turn-off that led to only one place—the Macklin Tool Company. And every Friday at three, on the dot, old man Macklin drove past Bertha's house and took that dirt road turn-off—with the weekly payroll. He always did the job alone. A rugged individualist from way back. And he was old, feeble, trusting, and defenseless.

All Fatstuff had to do, Bertha explained, was to be on that deserted dirt road turn-off before three, then lie down in the middle of it when he heard the sound of the approaching car. Mr. Macklin, who was a deacon in the church, would stop his car and get out to offer help to a stricken man. And Bertha had an old Luger with which Fatstuff could menace Mr. Macklin while relieving him of the payroll. Meanwhile, she'd have left her old coupe hidden fifty yards up the Post Road, off to the side of the road. After getting the payroll, Fatstuff could hurry to the car and drive straight to the bus station in Pomeroy, take a bus to New York. Since no one had seen the car in connection with the hold-up, Bertha would take the bus to Pomeroy, pick up her car, and join Fatstuff in New York. "It's as simple as that," Bertha said.

And Fatstuff had to agree. He went through with the plan.

The catch was, old man Macklin—it turned out—packed a gun. There had, subsequently, been an exchange of shots. But Fatstuff got there first with the most.

He left old man Macklin for dead—he looked dead to Fatstuff, who didn't waste too much time on an examination—and moved fast to Bertha's hidden coupe. But now, with a case of murder behind him, he didn't feel safe about driving to Pomeroy. Instead he drove back to the farmhouse for refuge. He knew he'd have to lie low for awhile. That was why he thought of the idea of hiding the money in the dried-up well. As long as Bertha didn't know exactly where it was, she *had* to hide him and take care of him.

Later, on the radio, they heard that old man Macklin had died—but not before he had given a detailed and deadly accurate description of Fatstuff. "Fattest short man I ever did see," Macklin was quoted as saying. "One of those they call Mister Five-by-Five. Great big jowls on him. Thighs so thick they near split his pants when he moved. Great big stomach. You couldn't miss him. You'd pick him out of a big crowd."

Well, Fatstuff (and Bertha) realized it meant he couldn't show his face and body outside the farmhouse. In Appleton anybody at all would notice and remember. That was when he got the great idea: he'd move into the attic and diet himself into a scrawny, anemic little man.

He went to the attic and lived there in solitude for almost two months. She brought him nothing but lettuce, skim milk, grapefruit—things like that. The pounds evaporated until finally he had the look of a walking skeleton. Finally, he felt safe to make his move . . .

He turned on his side on the hospital bed. He was thinking that it had been the starvation diet as well as the slugs of rye and the hot sun that had caused him to faint at the well. But not knowing this, Bertha had taken the bus to Pomeroy and was waiting for him and if she got angry enough—

He said to the nurse, "Do I have to sign something to get out of here?"

"No," she said. "You're in good health now. And your mind is—well, the concussion was only temporary. Oh! Here's the doctor now!"

Fatstuff slid over so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed. He felt a touch on the shoulder as he heard the doctor's hearty voice say, "Hello!"

Fatstuff was feeling of the corduroy suit. "Doc," he said, "I sure appreciate the free clothes, but couldn't they have come a little closer on the fit?"

"I think you'll find they fit fairly well," the doctor said.

"Who's kidding who around here?" Fatstuff said. "This suit feels as big as a tent."

"Well, you've been quite a chow-hound since your blackout."

"But—that was just this morning!"

He felt the doctor carefully removing the bandages from his eyes. He heard the doctor say, "Now I ask who's kidding who? This is September 17th. They brought you in here early in August. Your mind as well as your eyes have been pretty blank since then, since you hit that cement."

The bandages were off. Fatstuff stood up slowly. Then with measured tread he advanced toward a full-length mirror he saw across the ward. He reached it, stared at himself in amazement.

He couldn't stop staring.

Once more he was Mister Five-By-Five. Once more there were the enormous jowls, the heavy thighs, the enormous waistline. He was, if anything, more extraordinarily fat than he had been before that starvation diet. He knew the moment he set foot outside the hospital, he would be picked up by the police—before he could get the money or get out of town.

Behind him he heard the doctor say: "Well, are you ready to go now? You're free to go, you know."

He tried to find his voice, but all he could do was think, No! No! No . . .

There's Something Funny Here

by James Michael Ullman

As soon as he pulled into the busy downtown street from the parking garage, Herb Crain knew something was wrong.

The car seemed unaccountably sluggish. Moreover, the ride was springier than it should be, the engine was too noisy, and at the first red light his foot went down too far on the brake pedal.

"What the hell," he said.

Beside him, his wife Rose, a short, dumpy woman, scowled. "What's the trouble *now*?" she asked. "You've been complaining all night. At the restaurant, the meat was cold. At the theater, we were in a draft. And when we had the after-dinner drink, the service was too slow. I don't mind telling you, I'm fed up. After all, this *is* our 34th wedding anniversary. Why are you spoiling it for me? I think—"

"Yeah, sure," Herb said in an abstracted way. He was a trim, white-haired, bantam-sized man in his late-fifties, with an affection for the bow ties he'd worn in his young manhood. Over the years, he had grown so accustomed to Rose's constant critiques of his behavior that they now made virtually no-impression on him.

"But there's something funny about this car," he went on. "It doesn't act right."

"Ridiculous. You're so finicky—all those tune-ups, the time you waste poking around under the hood. If you'd spend just half that time thinking about what lies ahead for us . . ."

The light changed. Herb pressed hard on the gas pedal, but again the response was sluggish.

". . . we'd be better off," Rose continued. "You're retiring soon. Your pension and Social Security won't add up to much. You never did start that investment program you've always been talking about, so we'll have to—"

"I," Herb announced, "am going to stop for a minute."

"That's crazy. This is a no-parking boulevard."

"I don't care. I want a better look at this car, because all of a sudden I'm not sure it *is* our car."

Rose was incredulous. "What are you talking about? Five hours ago we drove this car into that garage and they gave us a claim check. Five minutes ago we gave them the claim check and they gave us back the car. The same make, model, year, color, everything. Here . . ." She opened the glove compartment. "Here's all our things, just as we left them. Road maps, the first-aid kit; the flashlight, pennies for the parking meters . . ." She closed the compartment and looked into the back seat. "And there's the old blanket, so the dog won't muddy the upholstery."

Grim-faced, Herb parked under an arc light and cut the engine.

Rose shook her head in exasperation as Herb flipped on the dome light and examined the car's interior. Yes, it *looked* the same. Still, one smudge on the ceiling seemed unfamiliar . . .

He got out. The license plates were his, all right, and the dent in the left front fender, where someone had banged it in a parking lot, was still there, but was that the exact spot? He recalled it as being a little higher.

Then he found two marks that had *not* been on the car before he brought it to the garage—a long scratch on the trunk, and a big dent in the rear bumper.

His mind made up, he slipped back behind the wheel, kicked the engine into life, and pulled the car into traffic.

"Satisfied?" Rose asked.

"Yes," he replied. "It's *not* our car. The trunk's scratched and the rear bumper is smashed. We're going back."

"Good grief! You can't tell me you remember *every* scratch. And even if they weren't on the car before we left it, they could have happened *while* it was there. Anyway, why would anyone go through all the trouble of making one car look like another car?"

"That," Herb told her, "is what I intend to find out."

A few moments later he eased the car to the curb in a no-parking zone across the street from the garage, a boxlike, four-story concrete structure.

"If I pull in at the IN ramp," he explained, "they'll take the car upstairs. But I won't give them this car until they give us *our* car, so we'll park this one here. If the police tow it away, I couldn't care less. Come on," he urged her.

He opened the door, but Rose settled back, arms folded over her chest.

"Even for a million dollars," she said, "I wouldn't go in there to see you make a fool of yourself. I knew you shouldn't have had those highballs and the after-dinner drink. Liquor always did go straight to your brain, but you were never *this* addled before."

"All right, wait here. In fact, that's better. If a policeman asks you to move, tell him where I am, and why."

"I'll do no such thing. He'd just lock you up with the other drunks."

He left Rose fuming, crossed the street, and walked into a waiting room in which about a dozen people were lounging.

Behind the cashier's cage, a heavyset, dark-haired young woman with thick, horn-rimmed glasses watched his approach with disinterest.

"Excuse me," he said. "I have a complaint."

"What about?"

"I picked up a car here a few minutes ago, but the hiker gave me the wrong one."

The cashier blinked. Several bystanders turned to stare.

"The wrong one?" the cashier asked. "I don't get it. If the hiker brought the wrong car, why'd you drive it away?"

"Because it *looked* like my car. It even had my license plates, and my things in the glove compartment. But it *isn't* my car."

"That's the nuttiest thing I ever—"

"This is *not* a joke." Conversation in the room fell away. "I'm a responsible citizen, the cashier of a prominent neighborhood bank. Here . . ." He handed her his business card.

"Where is the car we gave you?" she asked.

"Across the street. My wife's in it, waiting for me."

As they talked, several people walked into the waiting room and got in line behind Herb. "I've heard of a lot of strange things happening in garages like this," he went on, "tires switched, even engines. But this is the first time I've ever heard of a whole car being switched."

Her eyes narrowing behind her thick glasses, the young woman studied him for a moment. Was it his imagination, or did she suddenly seem apprehensive about something?

She came to a decision and said, "All right, mister. There's nothing *I* can do, but I'll call Mr. Bland."

"Who's he?"

"The owner. He runs several businesses in this part of town, and he'll probably be in his office now."

She turned her back to him, picked up a phone, and dialed. He couldn't hear what she said. Behind him, the people in the line were stirring impatiently.

The cashier looked up and said, "Mr. Bland asked if you could discuss this at his office. It's in a restaurant he owns near here, and—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Herb replied stubbornly. It had occurred to him that his one big advantage was the crowd in the waiting room. The more people who heard him voice his bizarre complaint, the sooner something would be done.

The cashier exchanged more words with Bland and then announced, "Sir, he'll be here in five minutes. So please step aside, so I can take care of these other people."

Herb settled on a bench. Five minutes, the cashier had said—but ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed, and still no Mr. Bland. Meanwhile, when not taking care of her customers, the bespectacled girl in the cashier's cage seemed unusually busy on her phone.

Finally, nearly half an hour after the girl's call, a big late-model car stopped in the IN ramp and a tall, well-built man in his forties stepped out. He wore a navy-blue blazer and flared, maroon trousers, and his black hair was elegantly coiffured.

He walked into the waiting room and glanced at the cashier, who nodded at Herb.

"I'm Phil Bland," the man greeted Herb smoothly. "You sure we can't handle this in my office? We'd be a lot more comfortable."

"No," Herb said. "I'd rather talk here."

"Sure." Bland smiled and offered his hand. "Mind telling me who *you* are?"

Taken aback by Bland's cordial approach, Herb shook his hand and stammered an introduction.

"Okay, Herb," Bland went on. "I try to run a legitimate operation, but I'll admit, sometimes things happen upstairs that I don't know about. What's the trouble?"

Herb repeated his story. Again, the waiting room fell silent.

"I see," Bland drawled. "It looked like your car, but it wasn't. I'm not doubting your word, but how could you be so sure?"

"I've told you," Herb said. "It didn't handle right. The response, the ride, the brakes, a lot of other things . . ."

"You determined this in just a few blocks?"

"Yes. But the most important things were the scratch on the trunk and the dent in the fender."

"Dents and scratches?" Bland gazed around the room with a tolerant, we're-in-this-together look. "Usually people file those claims with our insurance company. But this story about switching a whole car is so good that in your case I'll make an exception. How much you want for those dents?"

"Dammit," Herb replied angrily, "I'm not trying to cheat you. I came back because the car I drove away *is not the car I left.*"

Bland's expression turned somber. "You're not kidding, are you? Okay, I'll try to be reasonable, but just exactly what *do* you want us to do? Assuming that what you say happened really happened?"

A good question. Herb suddenly realized that he didn't know exactly what Bland or anyone else at the garage could do at this hour, and that his coming back so soon might have been an impetuous mistake—but he'd gone this far, so he persisted.

"At the very least," he said, "I want someone to explain to my satisfaction what's going on. Either that, or I'm going up into your garage to look for my *real* car."

"For your own protection," Bland replied, "I can't let you do that. This is the busiest time of night. The hikers know what they're doing on those ramps, but an outsider wandering around would be almost sure to get hit by a car."

"All right, if you won't let me go up, maybe you'll let the police go."

"Sure," Bland said. "But first, just where is this wrong car you say we gave you?"

"As I told your cashier, it's across the street. My wife's in it, and—"

"I'd like to look it over."

Herb and Bland went outside. A few curious people from the waiting room trailed after them.

The no-parking zone across the street, where Herb had left the car and his wife, was now empty.

Unbelieving, Herb stared at the spot. "I don't understand," he said slowly.

"Your wife drive?"

"Yes. But usually no farther than to the commuter station. She'd never drive in *this* traffic."

"She *could* drive, though. She have ignition keys?"

"In her purse. But—"

"If *her* key worked in the car, then it had to be *your* car, didn't it? How long would it take her to drive from here to your home?"

"Twenty, twenty-five minutes."

"And how long ago was it that you left her sitting in the car?"

Herb glanced at his watch. "Nearly forty minutes."

"It ever occur to you she'd get tired of waiting? Maybe in a few minutes you should call home to see if she got there safely."

Bland took Herb's arm and led him back to the waiting room. Vaguely, Herb noted that there seemed to be a lot more people lounging around now than there had been earlier.

"Folks," Bland announced, "it seems the mystery car is gone. Herb's wife started it with her own ignition key and drove it away."

"No," Herb said, trying to collect his thoughts. "She wouldn't have done that. Not tonight."

"There was something special about tonight?"

"It's our wedding anniversary."

"What'd you do?"

"Had dinner. And then—"

"Any drinks with dinner?"

"Two highballs, but—"

"You always have two highballs before dinner?"

"Certainly *not*. We went to a show and—well, we stopped in a bar for an after-dinner drink. Just one, though."

"I see. Ordinarily, you never drink. But tonight—"

In the cashier's cage, the phone rang. The bespectacled young woman picked it up, listened a moment, and said, "It's for Mr. Crain. A woman. She says she's his wife."

As the girl shoved the receiver into Herb's hands, all eyes were on him. "Herb?" Without a doubt, it was Rose's voice. "I'm home," she went on. "I want you to come home too."

"Rose? But why didn't you—"

"Just take a cab. Come home as soon as you can. I don't want to talk about it anymore." She hung up.

Stunned, Herb gazed at the receiver. Could he have been wrong all along? Could those few drinks have so altered his judgment? He'd been so positive it was the wrong car before, but now . . .

Bland asked, "What'd she say, Herb?"

"She drove home. She wants me to go home too."

"Sure. The 34th anniversary, the big dinner, the highballs, the show, the after-dinner drink . . ." He winked broadly at the people in the waiting room. "One, you said. But maybe there were more than one."

"Now, look—" Herb began angrily.

"All right, all right." Bland exuded good-natured tolerance. "We'll call a cab for you. We'll even pay your fare. Then, in the morning, you take another look at that car. If you think it was damaged in here, we'll make an adjustment. Fair enough?"

Suddenly Herb knew what he had to do. Bland himself had provided the answer. He took a deep breath, straightened his bow tie, and tugged at his sleeves, gathering himself for the effort he would have to make.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe I *did* have more to drink than I should. I won't be any more trouble, and thanks for the offer, but there's a cabstand down the block. I'll grab one there. All I can say is—I really *did* think it was the wrong car."

As Herb walked out of the waiting room, a car stopped in the IN ramp. A couple stepped out, their backs to Herb. The car's door hung open and the motor was running.

Quickly, Herb slipped behind the wheel of the waiting car, closed the door, and stomped hard on the accelerator. The car shot forward.

Behind him, an outcry arose from the waiting room and some men spilled out after him, but Herb ignored them. His heart pounding at an alarming rate, he steered the speeding vehicle up the ramp toward the second level.

There, a blind corner was marked with a confusing array of arrows and directions. Herb had no time in which to try to comprehend them. His choice was simple—either turn right or left—and he decided to turn left.

That was a mistake. He completed the turn to find himself going the wrong way down a long aisle of angle-parked cars, with another speeding car headed straight for him.

He braked hard. So did the hiker driving the other car. They stopped short of a head-on collision by inches, but in the process Herb's vehicle swerved and banged broadside into some of the parked cars.

As the hiker gazed in astonishment, Herb got out. Still dizzy from the impact, he looked around.

Yes, there it was, tucked in a corner about thirty yards from him—his

car, the real one, with its front end bashed in and the windshield a jagged, shattered mess.

Beyond it, moving away from a wall telephone, were two men in business suits, dragging Rose between them.

Herb called out. They turned.

Rose was gagged, and there was a bruise on her forehead.

He edged around the hiker's car, shouted, and ran toward them, but one of the men pulled a pistol from his belt and aimed. Herb stopped and opened his mouth to shout again, but the gun discharged and all went black . . .

A woman asked, "How do you feel?"

He opened his eyes. He was lying on a hospital bed.

Gazing down at him from behind her thick horn-rimmed glasses was the cashier from the parking garage. "Terrible," he told her.

"The bullet creased your skull, but the medics say you'll be okay. Your wife's all right too. You'll see her soon, but first, I'd better introduce myself." She showed him a badge.

"I'm detective second-class Sue Marino," she went on. "And on the department's behalf, I want to thank you for being alert enough to notice that the car wasn't yours, and then to drive back to complain. If you hadn't, Bland's gang might have gotten away with it."

"Away?" Herb asked. "With what?"

"The murder of the hiker who took your car upstairs when you left it earlier in the evening. That hiker and I were both undercover police agents. His name was Gowan, and he'd infiltrated Bland's gang. The garage was a transfer point for big narcotics shipments. The stuff would be hidden in cars driven by couriers. All the hikers were in on it. Before the blowup last night, the department was primed to mop up the whole operation when the next big shipment came in."

"And last night?"

"A new gang member recognized Gowan. Two executioners were waiting when he drove your car upstairs. He spotted them and tried to drive away. They blew his head off with shotguns. Your car's windows were shattered, the inside was splattered with blood, and the front was bashed in when it hit a wall—hardly a condition in which they could return the car to its owner."

"Why didn't they just tell me my car had been stolen?"

"That would have brought police into the garage. The gang needed

time to clean up the mess upstairs and dispose of your car and Gowan's body, so they used their underworld contacts to order the theft of a car just like yours. In this city, that didn't take long. They hoped that in the dark, you wouldn't notice the difference. They planned to follow you and steal the car later, so you'd never know what happened. You'd merely report a car theft from your residence, rather than from a public garage where a police undercover agent had disappeared."

"So when I came back with the car, they decided to kill me and Rose, too."

"Yes. At all costs, they wanted to keep you from going to the police last night. They abducted your wife and then tried to lure you away with her phone call. But I was already worried about Gowan. Ordinarily, I'd see him often from my cashier's cage, but he'd dropped out of sight for hours. So when you showed up with your kinky story and Bland agreed to come to the garage to see you, I was pretty sure it had something to do with Gowan's disappearance. Ordinarily, Bland ignored all customer complaints."

"The phone calls you made while I was waiting for Bland—they were to the police?"

"That's right. We packed the waiting room with plainclothesmen. But we still didn't know what had happened to Gowan or how to play the situation, so we couldn't have been happier when you jumped into the car and drove up the ramp. That broke it wide open. Our men went in after you, rescued your wife, and rounded up the whole gang. Enough of them are talking to insure convictions."

She paused. "Just one thing. After your wife phoned, why didn't you take a cab home as she suggested? She told us they were holding a gun at her head during the call, and all she could do was say a few words. She had no way to warn you it was a trap."

"Frankly," Herb said, "that's why I was afraid something had happened to her." He smiled. "If she'd *really* driven home alone, she would have said a lot more than just a few words. But what finally made me decide to steal a car and drive upstairs was something Bland said. He knew it was our 34th anniversary, but I hadn't told him. Obviously, he or someone working for him had just learned that from Rose, which meant he was involved up to his neck in whatever was going on in that garage."

The Ultimate Prey

by Talmage Powell

You'll understand why I can't pinpoint the location of the Island. It's one of those hundreds of pieces broken from the mainland mass along the perimeter of the Gulf of Mexico from eastern Texas around to western Florida.

Countless such islands remain as they were created, semitropical mangrove jungles swarming with poisonous life, separated from the throes of civilization by narrow bays, sounds, bayous. These islands run to a type and therefore have much in common.

Developers have swarmed onto countless other Gulf Coast islands, bulldozing the jungle, pumping, dredging, filling, spreading lawns and domestic palms, laying out streets, marinas, golf courses, sites for homes, schools, and expensive condominiums. Dedicated to the Beautiful Life, these islands also have much in common.

The one I'm talking about, however, is used for a purpose that makes it unique among all islands.

I first viewed the Island from a low-flying helicopter on a hot, sultry day. It looked so peaceful and inviting, swimming toward us on a blue-green, sparkling Gulf. In shape, it was a finger lying on the serene sea, four or five miles long and a couple of miles wide.

The northern end had been plushly prepared for people. Amid acres of lawn and tropical gardens, a modernistic home of glass and redwood threw its three large, adjacent wings into the sunshine. The lawn sloped to a snowy white beach and marina where a seaworthy cruiser and a small schooner with furled sails bobbed.

South of the house were spread the huge kidney-shaped swimming pool, doubles tennis courts, a landing strip with parked Cessna, and, tucked to one side, a couple of small cement-block buildings that I guessed housed the pumps, generators, and other necessities to keep the estate going.

The man-made paradise occupied only the northern quarter of the Island. Less than a mile south of the house the jungle crouched, a thick green tangle creating its own twilight; timeless and self-renewing, it seemed to brood with endless patience, awaiting the time when it would reclaim the small part that people had carved from it.

LaFarge, the sheriff, was flying the chopper, and so far he's merely grunted every time I asked him where he was taking me and why.

Conscious of the weight of the handcuffs about my wrists, I studied his swarthy, big-boned, cruel profile. A flicker in his dark, heavy-browed eyes and gathering of muscle tension in his bullish body warned me that the Island was our destination.

LaFarge's town, Ogathalla, was an unimportant dot on the map, a crossroads cluster of weathered buildings in piny woods country; little more than a posted speed limit and main street traffic light to halt the big Kawasaki I was riding cross-country.

Before the light changed, a dusty red-and-white cruiser with constabulary markings and blue-flashing blinker quartered in front of the cycle. The big, indistinct image behind the steering wheel leaned in my direction and thumbed me toward the curb.

Obediently, I walked the wheels over, straddling the seat.

The man I was to know as LaFarge got out of the cruiser and padded toward me. He studied me closely, my rather skinny face and denim-clothed frame, the curl of sandy hair below the crash helmet, the eyes behind amber glasses, the leather-strap sandals on bare feet, the blanket roll secured behind the seat. "What's your name, jimbo?"

"Rogers, Officer."

"Where you headed?"

"Down the coast."

"Where down the coast, jimbo?"

"Tampa, maybe. Sarasota. Fort Myers. Just someplace to work and spend the winter in the sun."

"Where you from?"

"El Paso," I said.

"Before that?"

"Phoenix. L.A. Vegas."

"You got people?" he asked, his dark, intent eyes making the question important.

"People?"

"Kinfolk," he snapped. "Someone who can vouch for you."

I slipped off the riding glasses and looked at him, frowning. "Why do I need someone to vouch for me?"

"The welcome mat ain't out for motorcycle bums in Ogathalla, jimbo."

"I'm not exactly a motorcycle bum, Officer. I've got money. I pay my way."

He kicked the front tire almost gently with his toe. "Just rambling around, seeing the country, enjoying your freedom, working when you have to?"

"Something like that." But it went deeper. It went back to hard questions that crystallized in my mind about the time I was one of the last of the soldier boys debarking from Vietnam. Simply framed questions without ready answers . . . who I am . . . where is truth among the falsehoods . . . what this business of living is all about . . . what to do with my life . . .

I was trying to settle a lot of things in my mind, but I doubted that the thug in uniform would understand, even if he were interested. So I said, "You've summed it up exactly, Officer."

"We'll see. We'll sure look into you." He moved with a short side step. "Now get off the wheels, jimbo. Our local pokey is just a short walk down the street."

I stood in dumb surprise. The look on my face gave him a short laugh. "Busting the speed limit as you rolled into town will do for a starter," he said. "You want to add a charge of resisting arrest?"

The urge flared in me to flatten him and kick the Kawa to life.

He read it in my eyes and dropped his hand to his gun. "Do it," he invited softly. "I step on your kind, with my heel. Do it—and I'll take you before the others even have a chance."

His reference to the others made no more sense than the rest of the situation, but I sensed clearly his sadism, and I hadn't survived to this point in time to give a prehistoric sheriff quick excuses to get his kicks.

The rest of the day was spent in a six-by-eight cell in the Ogathalla jail. The cells next to me in the decrepit old building were empty, leaving me suspended in sweltering heat and the after-smells of ten thousand previous tenants.

I wasn't yet in the grip of real gut-fear. I figured LaFarge for a bored

bully shoring up his tough, big-man self-image. He'd picked me up on a pretext, but he could only go so far. This was still the U.S. of A.

I couldn't see any other angle. I came from nowhere, was going nowhere. I had traveling bread; enough, I hoped, to satisfy LaFarge and a crooked magistrate in a kangaroo court.

I finally slept in a pool of soured sweat and the stink of the bumpy bunk.

After daybreak the next morning LaFarge came to the cell, grinned at me through the barred door, and slipped a tin plate through the slot at the bottom of the door. "Breakfast, Rogers."

I gripped the bars, white-knuckled. "I want a lawyer."

"Jimbo," he drawled, "you're old enough for your druthers not to hurt you. Relax and enjoy Ogathalla hospitality while you can."

He didn't seem to mind the things I yelled at him as he went away.

He returned in late afternoon with another tin plate of swill. After the vacuity of the day the sound of any other human footprint was welcome—almost.

"Can't we be reasonable, Sheriff?" I asked, ignoring the food.

"Sure. I'm the most reasonable man in the county."

"Then what's the charge against me?"

"Ain't decided yet, jimbo. I'm looking into you like you never been looked into before. I may be a hick sheriff, but I got a long-distance phone and a badge and a title, and before I'm through I can tell you if you've ever spit on Times Square."

I didn't have anything to say for a moment, and while I stood there looking at him through the space between the bars the first worms began crawling through my guts.

"Sheriff," I said, wetting my lips, "I do have some rights."

"Here, jimbo? Who says?"

"You can't keep me here forever."

"Who says? You got anybody to come fetch you out?"

The sun gradually slipped off in its habitual way, and nightfall came as a heavy and unwelcome shadow. The questions that had bothered me for so many months had a particular sharpness there in the darkness of LaFarge's jail, but I wouldn't let myself think too hard about anything, including the hours ahead and the idea of LaFarge having the last word.

I stood at the single small barred window listening to the nightly din of the nearby swamp. LaFarge couldn't have secured me more to his

liking if he'd put me in a tomb, although I knew, bitterly, that stockade inmates I'd heard about in Vietnam could have cracked this cruddy, weather-rotted cell without much trouble.

I turned finally and sat down on the edge of the bunk, head in my hands. After a while, I stretched out on my back, feeling the sag of the bunk, listening to it creak every time I drew a breath. It seemed about ready to fall apart . . . and with that thought, my eyes snapped open.

I sat up quickly, whipped the grimy pad to the foot of the bunk. The springs and braces and framing stood out in the moonglow. My hands explored and tested the framework. A diagonal corner-brace, a flat piece of old metal about an inch wide and twelve inches long, seemed to be hanging on only with the help of the rust. The rust showered off in grainy flecks as I took hold of the brace and twisted it back and forth.

The job was harder than it looked. The edges of metal rasped my palms to rawness. The effort and humid heat of the night oozed a sticky sweat out of my skin, but I had plenty of time. Patiently I twisted the brace back and forth, gripping it hard and putting muscle into it. At last, when the moon had shifted shadows about on the floor, I felt—or imagined—the brace yielding a little further.

Then the rivet at one end slipped out of its rust-eaten hole, and with the direct leverage that this gave me, I yanked the other end free. A pulse lifted through my chest as I gripped the end of the brace and took a couple of practice swings with it at an imaginary LaFarge hovering in the darkness.

He came to the cell two hours later than usual the next morning.

"We'll talk a little today before you have breakfast, jimbo." While he fitted the key in the lock, he looked in at me as if to note how I was making out. I was slightly ripe by this time, wrinkled, grimy, beardy, a few pounds having melted from a frame that couldn't afford the loss. LaFarge grinned with satisfaction at what he saw, and the metal weapon felt a few degrees warmer against my forearm where it was concealed by my sleeve.

LaFarge pushed the door open, and as he was wriggling the key from the bulky old lock the metal strap slipped down into my hand.

LaFarge glanced down at the lock, and I moved. He jerked about, glimpsing the metal strap slashing at him. Fear broke his knees and welded him to the door. The reflex saved him. The metal strap missed his head, glanced from his shoulder. Still clutching the door, he threw

himself blindly away from me. The metal strap smashed against the edge of the moving door, and before I could balance and swing a third time, LaFarge was outside the cell, the lock snicking, the door a barrier between us.

A moment passed while we faced each other. LaFarge was rubbing his shoulder, but if it hurt, he didn't seem to mind.

"You've made it personal now, Rogers," he said softly. "I'm going to enjoy taking you to the others. Enjoy it real personal, believe it."

I looked at the piece of metal in my hand, useless now. I opened my fingers and watched the strap hit the dirty cement floor with a small explosion of grit.

Finally, I looked up and saw the bars banded over the image of LaFarge's face. "Who are these others? What's this all about? Why me, LaFarge?"

"Because you were in the right place at the right time, jimbo."

"This is crazy!"

"Can you think of many things in this world that ain't?" He slipped the handcuffs from his belt. "Cool it while you can, jimbo. I won't take any more chances with you. Now then, you just stick your hands out here . . . both hands through the same opening between bars so's I don't hook you to the door . . . and we'll fit the bracelets. Then the two of us will march the little distance to the helipad behind the jail and take a little trip in the Department chopper. You'd be surprised at the crime in this bayou country: poachers, moonshiners, thieves, and killers. Chopper's the only way to chase some of them down."

The ride wasn't as short as LaFarge had promised. He flew us due south until the shoreline of the Gulf was below. Then we followed the coast eastward. We whirred over a traffic-clogged expressway, bisected the wake of a tanker steaming perhaps from Iran to the busy port just below the horizon to our rear.

Streaming along far beneath us were Gulf-front homes with private docks, pink-and-white resort hotels claiming miles of cake-icing beaches, little white sails cavorting offshore.

Then the interstate veered north through a wilderness of piny woods and cypress trees dripping Spanish moss, and we veered south with the curve of a shoreline that lost all traces of people.

In eight to ten minutes, LaFarge put the shoreline to our tail, and a scattering of small wilderness islands slid beneath the Plexiglas bubble.

None of these interested LaFarge. Then the finger, one-quarter pure plush and three-quarters raw jungle, came into view, and the chopper began to drop.

As we whirred closer to the estate, three people came out of the west wing of the palatial home and started jogging southward across the lawn.

"On their way to meet us," LaFarge said.

"The others?"

"The others, jimbo." LaFarge gave a short laugh. "Ten grand to me every time I bring them a tiger, jimbo. Helps a poor country sheriff make ends meet, though I don't find a special nobody on a motorcycle every day who meets the purely rigid requirements. Make you feel any better, knowing you're worth ten thousand dollars?"

LaFarge had settled the copter a considerable distance from the house, not more than a hundred yards from where the jungle began.

As LaFarge prodded me out with his gun, the three men who'd trotted from the house came to a halt, semicircled about me and looked me over.

They were all young, very close to my own age, dressed in khaki shorts, bush jackets, and laced boots. Each carried a carbine, lightweight brush guns, in the crook of his right arm.

I had a vague feeling of having seen them before, of knowing them from some time or place, which seemed impossible.

The man on my right was very tall and thin, with muscles like wire, a gaunt face, a corrugated skull that was already totally bald, though he was only in his middle twenties.

Facing me most directly was a heavyweight whose dark face and build reminded me of LaFarge. On his flank, the third member of the party was tall, broad-shouldered, round-faced, with ash-blond hair done in the wildest Afro style I'd ever seen.

"Rogers," LaFarge said, "meet the Quixote Hunt Club. Hepperling the bald, McMurdy with the beef. And Convers, the panther here with the big blossom of white hair."

I knew, hearing the names, why they hadn't seemed total strangers. I—along with millions—had met them at a distance in newscasts and Sunday supplements.

Hepperling meant sugar millions; McMurdy, shipping; Convers, oil. The three were the latest stems on family trees that in all branches meant a good slice of a billion dollars in economic wealth and power. For each of them the coming of age had meant trust funds, allowances, and in-

heritances the rest of us wouldn't risk dreaming about. The three might have pooled their resources and bought themselves a small, undeveloped country rather than a mere island.

As Quixotes, they'd frequently made headlines; crashing a plane and disappearing in Alaska for a week after a Kodiak hunt, going after jaguar in restricted tribal grounds in South America, creating an international incident when Kenyan authorities had arrested them for poaching bull elephants, and they'd taken pains to insult the Kenyan government before a bank of international television news cameras.

LaFarge was saying, "Rogers is completely safe, fellows. No family ties, no close friends. Nobody to ask the first question about his disappearance."

"We know," McMurdy dismissed LaFarge as a human being. "We always make our own inquiries when you have a prospect in custody, and we've the agents and the means."

LaFarge endured McMurdy's insulting tone like a well-trained hound.

McMurdy studied me head to toe. "You seem to come from a tough-luck line, Rogers. Father walked out when you were six or seven—never seen or heard from him since. Mother remarried—a real stinker. Both of them killed in a car crash when you were hardly out of high school. Worked your way through a couple years of college, then the Army taps you. Off for Vietnam. Rough time over there. MIA for a while. Wounded once. Finally hung up dockside, one of the last to leave."

"I didn't have much to come back to," I said.

"But you survived," Hepperling said. "You seem to survive anything. That's a good omen. That should make it good."

"Let's hope so," Convers said. "We haven't had a good island hunt in months now."

I think I'd suspected the truth when they'd first ringed the grounded chopper with their carbines, but now as it was coming closer to me with every passing second, I still couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. Then I looked at them, at the jungle, and back at them—and I had to believe it.

Convers bobbed his woolly white mane toward the jungle. "You'll be given a canteen of water and some field rations before you go in there, Rogers. How much life you buy for yourself is up to you, your wits and strength."

I was unable to move.

Hepperling said, "You do understand, Rogers?"

"Sure." The word was a husky whisper. "You guys have hunted everything, everywhere; until you've run all the way out of normal pleasure. So now, when you have the chance and can arrange it, here on this island . . . you hunt the prime game of all."

"How afraid are you, Rogers?" Convers asked as if the subject really interested him.

"If I wallowed on my knees would it help?"

"Last time the prey almost went nuts before dashing off into the jungle," Hepperling said, "screaming that we were crazy, not for real."

"Oh, you're for real," I said. "In twenty-seven years of living, I've discovered that anything can be for real on this planet. Adolph Hitler. Scientists who talk about dedication, and devote their lives to thinking up bigger bombs and deadlier germs. Charles Manson. The Mafia. I don't doubt that you three are rather mildly real, compared to some of the things that go on."

I walked a few steps from the chopper and stood looking at the jungle. Then I sat down on the green coolness of the grass. "Only I'm for real too, fellows. And you've left me just one thing. You've stripped me down to the one real thing. I won't do it. The hunt is off."

They came stalking toward me, their shadows flowing across me.

"That's the whole point of it," I said. "Without the point, there is nothing in it for you. Without fleeing prey trying to hang onto a few more hours of life there in the jungle, you've lost the point, and it's no dice. You've got the wrong tiger this time."

"LaFarge," McMurdy ordered in a quiet tone.

LaFarge came around to stand close in front of me. He pulled out his gun. "You want it right here, Rogers?"

"No," I said, "I don't want it anywhere for years and years yet. But you're betting against an enemy with nothing to lose, LaFarge. No matter what you do the hunt is off. And I don't believe you'll be paid for this one or trusted in the future."

He fired the gun almost in my face. The flash blinded me. I felt the bullet nip the hair on my crown.

I pushed back the need to be sick all over the place. "You'll have to do better than that, LaFarge."

He put the gun to my temple and slowly eased back the hammer.

"That's the surest way of guaranteeing no hunt, LaFarge."

Taking a step back, he ventured a glance at the face of his young employers. He didn't like the way they were looking at him. He didn't enjoy what he felt as they measured him. He wasn't liking any of it at all.

He coupled my name with a curse. "On your feet, Rogers. I'll make you run! Hit for the jungle!"

He exploded his booted foot directly at my face. He didn't have nearly the coordination or quickness of a Viet Cong. My handcuffed hands met the driving ankle. I flipped him hard, onto his back, and before he could catch the next breath, I'd wrung the gun from him and spun to face the others.

"Hold it!" I ordered.

Not a carbine moved. They had brains as well as loot. They knew they could have taken me—but not safely.

It was one of those crossroads moments in life for me, not because of anything outside myself, but because of the thought coming full-blown to my mind. I thought about the gig I'd had from the moment of birth. It seemed that the time was overdue for a putting of things in balance for a fellow named Rogers. The big, basic questions didn't bug me any longer. I was certain, right then, of the direction my life would take. I let a grin build on my lips.

In response, the first edge of tension eased from the Quixotes. They slipped glances from me to each other. Actually, there was a lot more rapport between the Quixotes and myself than between any of us and LaFarge.

"Fellows," I said, "being a country sheriff in mean bayou territory is risky business. If LaFarge turned up in some back bayou shot to death, no one would figure it any way except that he'd cornered one mean moonshiner or poacher too many."

I eased the snout of the gun in LaFarge's direction. "Into the jungle, big man."

"You're nuts, Rogers . . . Fellows, you tell this character—" His words broke off as he looked at them. He couldn't take his eyes from their faces. He took a backward step . . . then another . . . and whatever it was that he'd substituted for nerve all of his life died inside of him. He broke and ran, disappearing quickly into the jungle.

McMurdy was standing closest to me. Carefully, I turned the police pistol around and handed it to him butt first.

"Gentlemen," I said, "I think the hunt resumes. And don't forget to get the keys to the handcuffs when you've tracked him down."

That's how my association with the Quixotes began. Now I draw twenty-five grand a year, plus expenses. I travel the plunhest resorts. I drive a twelve-thousand-dollar sports car. I buy the finest food and wines and wear a hand-tailored wardrobe.

Not surprisingly, I practically have to fight off the chicks. I usually pick the best-looking and healthiest of the crop of empty-headed dropouts and runaways from good, substantial homes. They're easiest to con, and once on the Island it's too late for them to come to their senses and realize they're facing something entirely different from the romantic and exciting weekend they've been promised. They're among the runaways who every year are simply not found. None is ever traceable to the Island. I see to that.

Girls . . . the ultimate prey. The Quixotes thought the suggestion was the greatest when I hit them with it. I coupled the idea with the offer to act as their agent, roaming the country, recruiting the prey, and bringing them to the Island. I've proven my absolute reliability, and the Quixotes respect my advice.

Summing up the brand-new life, I guess you could say I owe LaFarge a vote of thanks.



Vienna Sausage

by Joyce Harrington

I was in the supermarket on Thursday and I saw the old man put a can of Vienna sausage in his pocket.

I didn't mean to see him. I wouldn't see a thing like that if I could help it. Would you? But there I was, coming around the corner from pickles and relishes and there he was; a little old man in a big old coat with the can in his hand. Then the hand was in his pocket. I guess I must have looked surprised, because that's how I felt. If I hadn't been so surprised I would never have looked at him. I just didn't have time to get my sights adjusted and pretend that I was looking for a good buy in tuna.

He looked back at me—sly and frightened and angry all at the same time. He was dirty too. His clothes were filthy, and there was ground-in grime on his neck, and he didn't smell too great. I registered all this in the split second I stood there. I thought, *Don't worry, old man, I won't tell anybody*—but I couldn't very well say that to him, could I?

I glanced at his shopping cart as I pushed my own up the aisle. He had a loaf of marked-down, day-old bread and a container of skim milk; too big to put in his pockets. I thought, *Rip off a cake of soap while you're at it, old man*. Then I lost myself in consideration of whether the weekly spaghetti feed could be varied by the substitution of rigatoni or maybe even lasagna. When you're cooking for a family of seven, five of whom are under the age of twelve, the only thing you can be sure of is that spaghetti once a week will make everybody happy—especially my pocketbook.

I saw him again at the meat case where I was debating the merits of the bargain sack of three whole chickens against the special of the week, eye round roast beef at a price that ought to buy a whole cow—hooves, tail and all. He was leaning over the lamb chops, all red and white and shiny in their clear plastic wrappings as if they were a stack of Hope

diamonds set out for the likes of him (and me) to gawk at and desire. I think he was drooling, but I didn't stick around to find out if he were planning a big heist of the crown jewels of the meat department. I grabbed a sack of chickens and headed down the homestretch into frozen foods and fresh produce. Pretty risky, I thought, trying to lift something from the meat counter. For all I—or he—knew, there were Brink's guards lined up every three feet behind that one-way glass with machine pistols trained on larcenous-hearted shoppers.

After loading up on bananas and orange juice, I headed for the check-out. It was getting close to dinnertime and the Thursday-special crowds were thinning out a little. I always did my shopping on Thursdays, right after I got off work. The office of the plumbing contractor, where I kept the books and sent out the bills, was two blocks away from the supermarket, and home was three blocks and around the corner in the other direction. I walked to work, and on Thursday mornings I towed my creaky old shopping cart with me. Jimmy would be home from the docks before I brought home the bacon, and the kids would be helping him throw together our traditional Thursday night pancake supper. It all worked out pretty well, with Jimmy and the kids pitching in and Mrs. McIntyre next door taking care of little Kevin who was only three and too young for school. However, even with both of us working, it was getting harder and harder to fill that old shopping cart.

When I got to the front of the store there were only two checkout lanes working. One was the express lane, so I had to get into the other one, right behind a "park-and-shop" lady. You know the kind I mean. They park their carts in the check-out line and then dash off up and down the aisles filling their arms with cans and boxes, dumping them in the cart and then dashing off again on another raid. They think they're putting something over on somebody, but all they're doing is wasting energy and holding up the line. Sometimes they get into fights. They always seem to be fat ladies with their hair in rollers, and this one was no exception. She scurried up with a ten-pound sack of potatoes under one arm and a six-pack of evaporated milk in the other and hissed at me, "I'm almost finished. Don't get ahead of me," and off she went.

I decided it wasn't worth getting angry about and settled down to wait for my turn. The checker was ringing up a big order and I was third in line after that, so I figured I'd have to wait about fifteen or twenty minutes. I started reading the *Daily News* I'd saved from the morning so Jimmy

could read it too. The old man hitched himself to the express line, and I noticed that he'd added a sack of dog meal to the milk and bread in his cart. I wondered what else he'd added to the Vienna sausage in the pocket of his bulky coat.

The "Letters to the Editor" column was pretty kooky, as usual, and I was reading one from a guy in Staten Island who wanted to ship all drug addicts to Alaska and make them work on the pipeline so we could get oil from there and outwit the Arabs. So I didn't notice when the four kids came in the door and spread out across the front of the store. I mean, none of us knew they were just kids right then, because they were all wearing ski masks, and three of them had guns. Even a kid looks pretty grown-up with a gun in his mitten.

The first clue I had that anything was wrong was when the two cash registers stopped zinging and the store got very quiet. One ski mask was at the door, and another was loping across to the manager's cubicle. They both had guns. A third one was standing at the end of the check-out counters, waving his gun around so we each had a chance to see that it was real. The fourth picked up a shopping bag and snapped it open. He said, loud and clear, "All the money goes in the bag, dig?"

We dug. The checkers started fumbling bills out of the cash register drawers and stuffing them into the shopping bag. The manager stumbled out of his cubicle, where he'd been sleeping or dreaming about next week's price increases, and ran right into a ski mask who shoved a gun into his paunch and backed him in his tracks toward the steel safe inside the cubicle.

"Wallets and purses, too, ladies and gentlemen. Spill out your pockets. Everything goes in the bag."

I opened my purse and got out my old wallet with the forty dollars inside that would just barely cover the week's groceries in my shopping cart. The "park-and-shop" lady skidded up with a head of lettuce and a net sackful of onions just in time to get in on the fun and games. She tried to tiptoe backward to the safety of the vegetable bins, but the ski mask at the door barked, "Hold it right there, lady." She squeaked a little, but stayed put.

The old man, who had just unloaded his milk and bread and dog food at the check-out, was shaking like he had palsy. I was feeling pretty rocky myself, but I felt sorry for the old guy who'd had enough guts to fill his pockets with food and now was going to lose what little money he had.

I watched his trembling hand head for his pocket, expecting him to drag out a wrinkled, hoarded couple of bucks. What came out was the can of sausage and the old geezer didn't shake a bit when he let fly. The can hit the ski mask at the end of the counter right between the eyes, and he staggered back into the pile of empty cartons lining the window. The old guy didn't let up; he must have had pockets the size of shopping bags. A can of beans went flying at the ski mask who was manhandling the manager and hit him behind the ear. Then we all got into the act. The one with the shopping bag went down on one knee when the express checker bopped him at close range with a can of pineapple juice. Soda bottles sailed through the air and some of them exploded on contact, shooting up fizzy geysers of pop. I slung a couple of quarts of beer—Jimmy should only see me, I thought—and followed through with a five-pound sack of sugar. We were all so high on the kick of battle, I guess we forgot these jokers had guns.

The ski mask at the door didn't forget. He let off one potshot into the hail of flying groceries and then beat it out the door. It was enough. Whether the guy was a supermarksman or it was just a lucky shot, the old man went down between the check-out counters like he'd been sandbagged.

The other three ski masks were groaning on the floor in the rubble of dented cans and broken glass. One of them had blood seeping out of the nose hole of his mask. The manager was holding the two remaining guns, one in each hand, and he looked like he could have used a pot holder for each one.

The old man lay crumpled and pale under his grime, with his big old coat fanned out around him so we could all see the pockets that he'd added to the inside. One of the checkers went into the manager's cubicle and set off the alarm.

When Patrolman Kenny Regan marched into the store a couple of minutes later, we were all feeling pretty glum. The old man was still lying on the floor looking very dead. We couldn't see any blood, but for all we knew he'd been hit in the back and was bleeding all over the floor underneath his overcoat.

Kenny walked over to the three huddled on the floor, his big heavy shoes crunching broken glass and sugar and spilled soda pop into a sticky mess.

"O.K., you guys," he roared, "let's see your ugly mugs."

One by one the ski masks peeled off their disguises and that's when we saw that they were only kids. The oldest one couldn't have been more than fifteen and the two remaining looked enough alike to be brothers. Three pairs of frightened eyes flitted around the circle of watching faces.

"How do you like that?" Kenny said. "It's a pack of baby desperadoes."

The manager squawked, "What am I supposed to do with these?" and held out the two guns as if they were two dozen rotten eggs.

The express checker piped up, "Officer, what are you gonna do about the old man? Can you tell if he's dead, or what?"

I could see that Kenny was getting rattled by all the questions. I was very relieved, and so was he, when the two squad cars pulled up in front, followed by a city ambulance.

In minutes the store was swarming with hard-faced men in blue, and we were all giving our versions of the attempted holdup. More squad cars arrived and the three kids were handcuffed and hustled away. Kenny Regan found himself a congenial post out of the thick of the questioning. Stalwart and silent he guarded the door, preventing busybodies from coming in and witnesses from going out.

Over the din, I heard the shrill excited voice of the manager. "I knew the old guy was shoplifting. But I swear, if it would bring him back to life, I'd let him rip off everything in the store."

"Do you really mean that, Jack?"

It got almost as quiet in the store as it was when the three guns were making conversation difficult. The ambulance attendants, who were trying to maneuver a wheeled stretcher into the cramped space at the end of the check-out counters, stopped what they were doing to watch their customer scramble to his feet.

"Do you really mean that?" the old voice croaked. He was standing up, leaning against the counter, patting himself all over with shaky, dirty hands.

"I thought you were shot! I thought you were dead!" the manager jabbered indignantly.

"Does it make any difference?" the old man cackled. "I'm shot but I'm not dead," and he groped in the breast pocket of his moth-eaten jacket and pulled out a can of Spam. The can had a hole in it, and pink shreds of meat oozed like baby fingers out of the hole. He held it aloft and did a little shuffle-footed victory jig.

"From now on," he shouted, "from now on, I always carry a can of

Spam next to me heart. Now, I want you to tell me, Jack, does your offer still hold?"

Half an hour later, I was bumping my way home with a load of groceries and quite a story to tell Jimmy and the kids. The old man was on his way home to whatever dingy social security room he lived in with a shopping cart full of free food. I'm afraid we all ganged up on the manager and shamed him into keeping his word, while Kenny Regan and the rest of the boys in blue smiled and looked the other way. My own cash register tape fluttered out of the top of one of the sacks I was towing behind me. Forty dollars and thirty-nine cents. I'd had to give the checker a subway token and four pennies I scrounged out of the bottom of my purse. If things get any worse, I may have to do something about enlarging the pockets of my coat.



Sniff

by Donald E. Westlake

Albert felt the sniffles first on Monday, which was Post Office Day, but he didn't worry about it. In his experience, the sniffles came and went with the changing of the seasons, never serious enough to need a call on the family doctor; how should he have known that *these* sniffles were the harbinger of more than Spring? There was no reason to think that this time...

Well, Monday, at any rate, was Post Office Day, as every Monday had been for well over a year now. Sniffles or no sniffles, Albert went through his normal Post Office Day routine just the same as ever. That is, at five minutes before noon he took a business-size large envelope from the top left drawer of his desk, placed it in the typewriter, and addressed it to himself, thusly:

Albert White
c/o General Delivery
Monequois, N. Y.

Then, after looking around cautiously to be absolutely certain Mr. Clement was nowhere in sight, he put a return address in the upper left hand corner, like so:

After five days return to:
Bob Harrington
Monequois Herald-Statesman
Monequois, N. Y.

Finally, taking the envelope from the typewriter, Albert affixed a stamp to it from his middle desk drawer and tucked the still-empty envelope in the inside pocket of his jacket. (It was one of his small but intense and

very secret pleasures that Mr. Clement himself, all unknowing, was supplying the stamps to keep the system in operation.)

Typing the two addresses on the envelope had taken most of the final five minutes till noon, and putting his desk in order consumed the last several seconds, so that at exactly twelve o'clock Albert could stand, turn to the right, walk to the door, and leave the office for lunch, closing behind himself the door on which was painted the legend JASON CLEMENT, Attorney-at-Law.

His first stop, this and every Monday lunchtime, was in the Post Office, where he claimed the bulky white envelope waiting for him in General Delivery. "Here we are, Mr. White!" cried Tom the Postal Clerk, as usual. "The weekly scandal!"

Albert and Tom the Postal Clerk had come to know one another fairly well in the course of the last fifteen months, what with Albert dropping in every Monday for his General Delivery letter. In order to allay any suspicion that might have entered Tom the Postal Clerk's mind, Albert had early on explained that Bob Harrington, the well-known crusading reporter on the Monequois newspaper, had employed Albert as a sort of legman to check out leads and tips and confidential information that had been sent in by the newspaper's readers. "It's a part-time job," Albert had explained, "in addition to my regular work for Mr. Clement, and it's very hush-hush. That's why Bob sends me the material care of General Delivery. And why we make believe we don't even know one another."

Tom the Postal Clerk had grinned and winked and cried, "Mum's the word!"

But later on Tom the Postal Clerk apparently did some thinking, because one Monday he said to Albert, "Why is it you let this stuff sit around here so long? Almost a week, most times."

"I'm supposed to pick up mail on Monday," Albert answered, "no matter when Bob may send it out to me. If I were to come in here every day of the year, it might cause suspicion."

"Oh, yeah," said Tom the Postal Clerk, and nodded wisely. But then he said, "You know, you don't want to miss. You see this up here in the corner, this 'After five days return to—' Well, that means exactly what it says. If you don't pick one of these up in the five days, well, that's it."

Albert said, "Would you really send it back?"

"Well, we'd have to," said Tom the Postal Clerk. "That's the regulations, Mr. White."

"I'm glad," said Albert: "I know Bob wouldn't want information like this sitting around too long. If I ever let a letter stay more than five days, you go ahead and *send* it back. Bob and I will both thank you."

"Check," said Tom the Postal Clerk.

"And you won't ever give one of these letters to somebody who *says* he's from me."

"Definitely not, Mr. White. It's you or nobody."

"I mean, even if you got a phone call from somebody who said he was me and he was sending a friend to pick up the letter in my place."

Tom the Postal Clerk winked and said, "I know what you're getting at, Mr. White. I know what you mean. And don't you worry. The U.S. Mails won't let you down. No one will ever get delivery on any of these letters but you or Mr. Harrington, and that's guaranteed."

"I'm glad to hear that," Albert said, and meant every word of it.

In the months since then, Tom the Postal Clerk had had no more questions, and life had gone along sunnily. Of course, it was necessary these days for Albert to read Bob Harrington's column in the Herald-Statesman, since from time to time Tom the Postal Clerk would mention one of the incredible scandals Bob Harrington was incessantly digging up and would want to know if Albert had had anything to do with that particular case. In most instances, Albert said no, explaining that the majority of leads he was given turned out to be worthless. When he did from time to time admit that yes, such-and-such a ruined reputation or exposed misdeed had been a part of his undercover work for Bob Harrington, Tom the Postal Clerk beamed like a quiz show winner. (Tom the Postal Clerk was obviously a born conspirator who had never—till now—found an outlet for his natural bent.)

Today, however, Tom the Postal Clerk had nothing undercover to talk about. Instead, he looked closely at Albert and said, "You got a cold, Mr. White?"

"It's just the sniffles," Albert said.

"You look sort of rheumy around the eyes."

"It's nothing," Albert said. "Just the sniffles."

"It's the season for it," said Tom the Postal Clerk.

Albert agreed it was the season for it, left the Post Office, and went to City Hall luncheonette, where he told Sally the Waitress, "I think the roast beef today."

(Albert's wife, Elizabeth, would gladly have made a lunch for him, and

Albert would gladly have eaten it, except that Mr. Clement did not believe that law clerks—even forty-year-old law clerks with steel-rim glasses and receding hairlines and expanding waistlines—should sit at their desks in their offices and eat sandwiches from a paper bag. Therefore the daily noontime walk to City Hall Luncheonette, which served food that was adequate without being as scrumptious as the menu claimed.)

While Sally the Waitress went off to order the roast beef, Albert walked back to the men's room to wash up and also to continue the normal routine of Post Office Day. He took from his right side jacket pocket the letter which Tom the Postal Clerk had just given him, carefully ripped it open, and took from it the bulky wad of documents it contained. This package went into the fresh envelope he had just typed before leaving the office. He sealed the new envelope and returned it to his inner jacket pocket, then ripped the old envelope into very small pieces and flushed the pieces down the toilet. He then washed his hands, went out to sit at his normal table, and ate a passable lunch of peas, french fries, rye bread, coffee, and roast beef.

He had first stumbled across the originals of these documents eight years ago, one day when Mr. Clement was detained in court and Albert had required to know a certain fact which was on a certain piece of paper. With no ulterior motive he had searched Mr. Clement's desk, had noticed that one drawer seemed somewhat shorter than the others, had taken it out to look behind it, had seen the green metal box back there, had given in to curiosity, and within the green metal box had learned that Mr. Clement was very very rich and had become so by grossly dishonest means.

Mr. Clement was an old man, a bony white-haired firebrand who still struck awe in those who met him. And not always merely awe; he carried a cane with a silver knob, and had been known to flail away with it at persons who had been ungracious or rude to him in streets, buses, stores, or wherever he happened to be. His law business leaned heavily to estates and the affairs of small local corporations. The documents in the green metal box proved that Mr. Clement had stolen widely and viciously from these estates and corporations, had salted most of the money away in bank accounts under false names, and was now a millionaire several times over.

A confusing medley of thoughts had run through Albert's mind on finding these documents. First, he was stunned and disappointed to learn

of Mr. Clement's perfidy; although the old man's irascibility had kept Albert from ever really liking him, he *had* respected and admired him, and now he was learning his respect and admiration had been misplaced. Second, he was terrified at the thought of what Mr. Clement would do if he learned of Albert's discovery; surely these documents limned a man ruthless enough to stop at nothing if he thought exposure were near. And third—amazing himself—he thought of blackmail.

In those first kaleidoscopic moments, Albert White found himself yearning for things the existence of which he had hardly ever before noticed. Acapulco. Beautiful women. White dinner jackets. Sports cars. Highballs. Penthouses. Wouldn't Mr. Clement pay for all these things, in order to keep Albert's mouth shut?

Of course he would. If there were no *better* way to shut Albert's mouth. The thought of potential better ways made Albert shudder.

Still, he *wanted* all those things. Ease and luxury. Travel. Adventure. Sinning expensively. All that jazz.

At intervals over the next few months, Albert snuck documents out of the green metal box and had them photostated. He continued until he had enough evidence to put Mr. Clement behind bars until the twenty-second century. He hid this evidence in the garage behind the little house he shared with his wife Elizabeth, and for the next four years he didn't do a thing.

He needed a plan. He needed some way to arrange things so that the evidence would go to the authorities if anything happened to him, and also so that he could convince Mr. Clement that he had the evidence and the authorities would get it unless, and also so that Mr. Clement couldn't get his hands on it himself. A tall order. For four years Albert had no way to fill it.

But then he read a short story by a writer named Richard Hardwick, outlining the method Albert eventually came to use, with the documents mailed to himself c/o General Delivery and a crusading reporter for the return address. Albert promptly initiated the scheme himself, pruned his evidential documents down to manageable proportions, sent them circulating through the postal system, and saw that everything worked just as Hardwick had said it would.

Now, all that was left was to approach Mr. Clement, detail the evidence and the precautions, arrange satisfactory terms, and sit back to enjoy evermore a life of luxury.

Uh-huh.

The same day Albert dropped the envelope into the mailbox for the very first time he also went to beard Mr. Clement in his den; that is, in his inner office. Albert knocked at the door before entering, as he had been taught years and years ago when he'd first obtained this employment, stepped inside, and said, "Mr. Clement?"

Mr. Clement raised his bony face, glared at Albert with his stony eyes, and said, "Yes, Albert? What is it?"

Albert said, "Those Duckworth leases. Do you want them this afternoon?"

"Naturally I want them this afternoon. I told you yesterday I would want them this afternoon."

"Yes, sir," said Albert, and retreated.

Back at his desk, he sat and blinked in some confusion at the far wall. He had opened his mouth, back there in Mr. Clement's office, with the full intention of saying, "Mr. Clement, I know all," and it had been with baffled consternation that he had heard himself say instead, "Those Duckworth leases." Besides the fact that he hadn't intended to say "Those Duckworth leases" at all, there was the additional fact that he had already known Mr. Clement would want the Duckworth leases this afternoon. Not only a wrong question, but a useless question as well.

"I was afraid of him, that's all," Albert told himself. "And there's no reason to be afraid. I do have the goods on him, and he doesn't dare touch me."

Later that same day, Albert tried again. It was, as a matter of fact, when he brought the Duckworth leases in. He placed them on the desk, stood around a few seconds, then coughed hesitantly and said, "Mr. Clement?"

Mr. Clement glowered. "What is it this time?"

"I'm not feeling too well, Mr. Clement. I'd like to take the rest of the afternoon off, please."

"Have you typed the Wilcox papers?"

"No, sir, not yet."

"Type them up, and then you can go."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

A saddened Albert left Mr. Clement's office, knowing he had failed again and knowing also there was no point in his trying any more today; he'd only go on failing. So he merely typed the Wilcox papers, tidied his

desk, and went home an hour early, explaining to Elizabeth that he'd felt a bit queasy at the office, which was perfectly true.

In the fifteen months that followed, Albert made frequent attempts to inform Mr. Clement that he was in the process of being blackmailed, but somehow or other when he opened his mouth it was always some other sentence that came out. Sometimes, at night, he practiced in front of a mirror, outlining the situation and his demands with admirable clarity and brevity. Other times, he wrote the speeches out and set himself to memorize them, but the prepared speeches were always too verbose and unwieldy.

It was clear enough in his mind what he intended to say. He would tell about his discovery and of the General Delivery scheme. He would explain his desire to travel, explain how he intended to remail the evidence every week to a new location—Cannes, Palm Beach, Victoria Falls—and point out that he would require a large and steady income to enable him to pick the evidence up each time within the five day deadline. He would say that, although he thought Elizabeth was perhaps too much of a homebody to fully enjoy the sort of life Albert intended leading from now on, he did still feel a certain fondness for her and would prefer to be able to think that she was being suitably provided for by Mr. Clement in his absence.

He *would* say all that. Some day. All hope, he believed, was not yet lost. The day would come when his courage was sufficiently high or his desire for the good life sufficiently strong, and on that day he would *do* it. The day, however, had not yet come.

In the meantime, the mailing and re-mailing of the blackmail letter had become a normal part of Albert's weekly routine, integrated into his orderly life as though there were nothing strange about it at all. Every Monday, on his way to lunch, he picked up the letter at General Delivery. Every Monday, in the washroom of the City Hall Luncheonette, he transferred the documents to the fresh envelope and flushed the used envelope away. Every Monday, on the way back to work from lunch, he dropped the letter into a handy mailbox. (The letter would reach Tom the Postal Clerk on Tuesday. Wednesday would be day number one, Thursday number two, Friday three, Saturday four, Sunday no number, and Monday five, the end of the old cycle and beginning of the new.)

This particular Monday was no different from any other, except of course for the sniffles. Sally the Waitress commented on that, saying, as

she delivered the roast beef, "You look like you're coming down with something, Mr. White."

"Just the sniffles," said Albert.

"Probably one of those twenty-four-hour bugs that's going around," she said.

Albert agreed with her diagnosis, ate his lunch, paid for it and left his usual tip, and walked on back to the office, making two stops on the way. The first was at the handy mailbox, where he dropped the evidence for another round-trip through the postal system, and the second was at the Bizy Korner Stationery, where he bought a pocket packet of tissues for his sniffles.

He would have preferred to think that Sally the Waitress was right about the length of time these sniffles would be with him—the "twenty-four-hour bug" she had mentioned—but he rather doubted it. From past experience he knew that the sniffles lasted him approximately three days; he could look forward to runny nose and rheumy eyes until about Thursday, when it would surely begin to clear up..

Except that it didn't. Monday went by, uneventful after the remailing of the documents, Tuesday and Wednesday followed, and Thursday dawned clogged and stuffy, both in the outside world and in the interior of Albert's head. Albert wore his raincoat and rubbers, carried his umbrella, and snuffled his way through Thursday, going through an entire box of tissues in the office.

And Friday was even worse. Elizabeth, the kind of woman who looks most natural when wearing an apron and holding an apple pie, took one look at Albert on Friday morning and said, "Don't you even bother to get up. I'll call Mr. Clement and tell him you're too sick to go to work today."

And Albert was. He was too sick to go to work, too sick even to protest at having to stay in bed, and so utterly miserably sick that he even forgot all about the letter ticking away in General Delivery.

He remained just as sick, and just as oblivious, all through the weekend, spending most of his time in uneasy dozing, rising to a seated position now and then in order to down some chicken broth or tea and toast and then reclining at once to sleep some more.

About eleven o'clock Sunday night, Albert awoke from a sound sleep with a vision of that envelope clear in his mind. It was as though he had dreamed it; the envelope, clean and clear, sitting fat and solitary in a

pigeonhole, and a hand reaching out to take it, a hand that belonged to Bob Harrington, crusading reporter.

"Good Heavens!" cried Albert. Elizabeth was sleeping in the guest bed while Albert was sick, and so didn't hear him. "I'd better be well tomorrow," he said aloud, laid his head back on the pillow, and stayed awake quite a while thinking about it:

But he wasn't well on the morrow. He was awakened Monday morning by the sound of rain beating on the bedroom window. He sat up, knew at once that he was as dizzy and weak as ever, and felt a real panic begin to slide over him like a blanket of fire. But he fought it down, if not quite out; he had, at all costs, to remain calm.

When Elizabeth came in, to ask him what he wanted for breakfast, Albert said, "I've got to make a phone call."

"Who do you want me to call, dear?"

"No," said Albert firmly. "I have to make the call."

"Dear, I'll be glad to—"

Albert was seldom waspish, but when the mood was on him he could be insufferable. "What would make you happy," he now said, the sardonic ring in his voice muffled a bit by the blockage in his nose, "is of not the slightest interest to me. I must make a phone call, and all I ask of *you* is that you help me get to the living room."

Elizabeth protested, thinking to be kindly, but eventually she saw Albert was not going to be reasonable and so she agreed. He was weak as a kitten, and leaned heavily on her as they made their way down the stairs to the first floor and into the living room. Albert sagged into the chair beside the phone and sat there panting a few minutes, done in by the exertion. Elizabeth meantime went to the kitchen to prepare, as she put it, "a nice poached egg."

"A nice poached egg," Albert muttered. He felt vile, he felt vicious. He had never been physically weaker in his life, and yet he had never felt before such violent desires to wreck furniture, shout, create havoc, beat people up. If only Mr. Clement had been here now, Albert would have told him what was what in jig time. He'd never *been* so mean.

Nor so weak. He could barely lift the phone book, and turning the pages was a real chore. Then, of course, he looked it up in the wrong place first; under 'P' for 'Post Office'. Finding the number eventually in one of the sub-headings under 'US GOVT', Albert dialed it and said to the person who answered, "Let me talk to Tom, please."

"Tom who?"

"How do I know? Tom!"

"Mister, we got three Toms here. You want Tom Skylozowsky, you want—"

"Tom!" cried Albert. "At the General Delivery window!"

"Oh, you mean Tom Keinebunk. Hold on a minute."

Albert held on three minutes. At intervals he said, "Hello?" but received no answer. He thought of hanging up and dialing again, but he could hear voices in the background, which meant the receiver was still off the hook at the other end, which probably meant if he broke the connection and dialed again he'd get a busy signal.

His impatience was ultimately rewarded by the sound of Tom the Postal Clerk's voice saying, "Hello? You want me?"

"Hello there, Tom," said Albert, striving for joviality. "It's me, Mr. White. Albert White, you know."

"Oh, yeah! How are ya, Mr. White?"

"Well, that's just it, Tom, I'm not very good. As a matter of fact, I've been sick in bed all weekend, and—"

"Gee, that's too bad, Mr. White. That's what you were coming down with last week, I bet."

"Yes, it is. I was—"

"I knew it when I saw you. You remember? I said how you looked awful rheumy around the eyes, remember?"

"Well, you were right, Tom," said Albert, keeping a tight lid on his impatience. "But what I'm calling you about," he said, rushing on before Tom the Postal Clerk could produce any more medical reminiscences, "is the letter you've got for me."

"Let's see," said Tom the Postal Clerk. "Hold on." And before Albert could stop him he'd klunked the phone down on a table somewhere and gone away.

As Albert sat in impotent rage, waiting for Tom the Chipper Moron to return, Elizabeth appeared with a steaming cup of tea, saying, "Drink this, dear. It'll help keep your strength up." She set it on the phone table and then just stood there, hands folded over her apron. Hesitantly, she said, "This must be awfully important."

It occurred to Albert then that sooner or later he was going to have to explain all this to Elizabeth. What the explanation would be he had as yet no idea; he only hoped it would occur to him before he had to use

it. In the meantime, a somewhat more pleasant attitude on his part might serve as an adequate substitute.

He fixed his features into an approximation of a smile, looked up, and said, "Well, you know, it's business. Something I had to get done today. How's the poached egg coming?"

"Be ready in just a minute," she said, and went on back to the kitchen.

Tom the Postal Clerk returned a minute later, saying, "Yep, you've got a letter, Mr. White. From You-know-who."

"Tom," said Albert, "now, listen carefully. I'm sick today, but I hope to be better by tomorrow. Hold on to that letter. Don't send it to Bob Harrington."

"Just a sec, Mr. White."

"Tom—!"

But he was gone again.

Elizabeth came in and pantomimed that the poached egg was ready. Albert nodded and made his smile face and waved his hand for Elizabeth to go away, and Tom the Postal Clerk came back once more, saying, "Say, there, Mr. White, we've had this letter since last Tuesday."

Elizabeth was still standing there. Albert said into the phone, "I'll be up and around in just a day or two." He waved violently for Elizabeth to go away.

"You better call Mr. Harrington," suggested Tom the Postal Clerk. "Tell him to send it out again as soon as it comes back."

"Tom, hold it for me!"

"I can't do that, Mr. White. You remember, we talked about that once. You said yourself we should definitely send it back if you didn't pick it up in the five days."

"But I'm sick!" cried Albert.

Elizabeth persisted in standing there, looking concerned for Albert's well-being when in point of obvious fact she was crazy to know what this phone call was all about.

Tom the Postal Clerk, with infuriating calm, said, "Mr. White, if you're sick you shouldn't be doing any undercover work anyway. Except under the bedcovers, eh? Ha-ha."

"Tom, you *know* me! You can recognize my voice, can't you?"

"Well, sure, Mr. White."

"The letter's addressed to *me*, isn't it?"

"Mr. White, postal regulations say—"

"Oh, *damn* postal regulations!"

Elizabeth looked shocked. The silence of Tom the Postal Clerk sounded shocked. Albert himself was a little shocked. He said,

"I'm sorry, Tom, I didn't mean that, I'm a little upset and being sick and all—"

"It isn't the end of the world, Mr. White," Tom the Postal Clerk said, now obviously trying to help. "Mr. Harrington isn't going to fire you or anything, not if you're sick."

Albert, with a new idea created by Elizabeth's unending presence directly in front of him, said, "Tom, listen. Tom, I'm going to send my wife down to get the letter." It meant telling Elizabeth the truth, or at least an abridged version of the truth; but it could no longer be helped. "I'll have her bring identification from me, my driver's license or a note to you or something, and—"

"It just can't be done, Mr. White. Don't you remember, you told me that yourself, I should never give one of these letters to anybody but you in person, no matter what phone calls I got or anything like that."

Albert did remember that, damn it. But this was different! He said, "Tom, please. You don't understand."

"Mr. White, now, you made me give you my word—"

"Oh, shut up!" cried Albert, finally admitting to himself that he wasn't going to get anywhere, and slammed the phone into its cradle.

Elizabeth said, "Albert, what is this? I've never seen you act this way, not in all your life."

"Don't bother me now," said Albert grimly. "Just don't bother me now."

He leafed through the phone book again, found the number of the *Monequois Herald-Statesman*, dialed it, and asked to speak to Bob Harrington.

The switchboard girl said, "One moment, puh-leez."

In that moment, Albert visualized how the conversation would go. He would tell a crusading reporter that a letter he had never mailed was going to be returned to him and would he please not open it? This, to a crusading reporter! Ask someone like Bob Harrington not to open a letter which has come to him via the most unusual and mysterious of methods; it would be like throwing a raw steak into a lion's cage and asking the lion please not to eat it.

Before the moment was up, Albert had cradled the receiver.

He shook his head sadly, back and forth. "I don't know what to do," he said. "I just don't know what to do."

Elizabeth said, "Shall I call Dr. Francis?"

Dr. Francis had been called on Friday, had prescribed over the phone, and had himself called the pharmacy to tell them what to deliver to the White household. It had been said, with some justice, that Dr. Francis wouldn't make a house call if the patient were his own wife. But Albert, suddenly aflame with a new idea, cried, "Yes! Call him! Tell him to get over here right away, it's an emergency! In the meantime," he added, more quietly, "I'll eat my poached egg."

Dr. Francis arrived about two that afternoon, shucked out of his sopping raincoat—it was the worst rainstorm of the Spring season thus far—and said, in a disgruntled manner, "All right, let's see this emergency."

Albert had remained on the first floor, reclining on the living room sofa and covered with blankets. Now he propped himself up and called, "Me, Doctor! In here!"

Dr. Francis came in and said, "You're a virus, aren't you? I prescribed for you last Friday."

"Doctor," said Albert urgently, "I absolutely have to go to the post office today. It's vital, a matter of life and death. I want you to give me something, a shot, whatever it is you do, something that will keep me going just long enough to get to the post office."

Dr. Francis frowned and said, "What's this?"

"I have to get there."

"You've been watching those TV spy thrillers," Dr. Francis told him. "There's no such thing as what you want. When you're sick, you're sick. Take the medicine I prescribed, stay in bed, you might be on your feet by the end of the week."

"But I've got to go there today!"

"Send your wife."

"Yaaaaahhhhh!"

It was nothing but fury and frustration that kept Albert moving then. He came up off the sofa in a flurry of blankets, staggered out to the front hall, dragged his topcoat from the closet and put it on over his pajamas, slammed a hat on his head—he was wearing slipper socks on his feet—and headed for the front door. Elizabeth and Dr. Francis were both shouting things at him, but he didn't hear a word they said.

Two steps from his front door, Albert's slipper socks skidded on the

wet pavement, his feet went out from under him, down he went in a flailing of arms and legs, and that's how he broke his collarbone.

Elizabeth and Dr. Francis carried him up to his bed. And there, after Dr. Francis taped him, he stayed, silent and grouchy and mad at the world.

He was still there Wednesday afternoon, when Elizabeth came in, an odd expression on her face, and said, "Some men are here to see you, dear."

He knew who they were. "I don't want to see them," he said. And then, in a burst of irritation, "I don't want to see anybody! Don't you realize I've lost my job?"



Pocket Evidence

by Harold Q. Masur

There is a cynical little caveat which says: If you can't stand the time, don't commit the crime.

U.S. District Judge Edward Marcus Bolt failed to heed this injunction. He had committed a crime and when he was found out, the prospect of serving time in a federal penitentiary unhinged him completely. Tossed off the bench, disbarred, disgraced, disavowed by his colleagues, ego mutilated, deprived of his sumptuous young bride, all this was more than he could stomach—so the judge put the muzzle of a gun against his temple and squeezed one off.

It ended the judge's problems, but created some new ones for his widow, Laura Bolt. Tall, blonde, with innocent blue eyes and teeth perfectly capped for her career as a fashion model, she suspended her work when she married the judge but resumed it after his death. Now she sat alongside my desk, pale, apprehensive, tremulous.

"The man wants his money back," she told me.

"What money?"

"The money he claims he gave my husband."

"The fifty thousand dollar bribe?"

"I guess so. He called me on the telephone and said he'd paid Edward fifty thousand dollars to perform certain services and Edward failed to deliver." She gave me a look of forlorn appeal. "I came to you, Mr. Jordan, because you were Edward's lawyer and you were very helpful after his—er—accident."

I let the euphemism pass. I had indeed been Judge Bolt's lawyer—for maybe like about thirty minutes. At the time he retained me, he'd been presiding over the trial of Ira Madden, president of Amalgamated Mechanics.

Madden was charged by the government with embezzling one million dollars from the union treasury and although the indictment failed to

state as much, they suspected he had squirreled it away under a numbered account in a Swiss bank.

Then, while still presenting its case, the Justice Department started an investigation of rumors that one of Madden's lackeys, a man named Floyd Oster, had reached the judge with a fifty thousand dollar bribe—and that exact sum was found taped under a fender of His Honor's car and identified by serial numbers as a recent withdrawal from one of Madden's accounts. In a panic, the judge got through to me with an SOS, summoning me to his home, but he must have been very close to the brink because he finished himself off before I got there.

It resulted in a mistrial. Now the government was preparing to bring Ira Madden back into court again. Floyd Oster, the bagman, was himself under indictment for bribery. There had been sundry other complications which I managed to straighten out for the widow. Now, apparently, she needed my help again.

I said, "Tell me exactly what happened, Mrs. Bolt."

She swallowed and drew a breath. "I got the call late last night. A man phoned and said, 'Listen to me, lady. I'm only going to say this once. We paid the judge fifty grand. He promised to help us on something, but he chickened out and shelved himself before he could deliver. We want our money back. Do you read me, Mrs. Bolt? Fifty grand. Have the cash ready day after tomorrow and we'll be in touch. Just stay away from the law or you'll wish you'd never been born.'"

"Bluster," I said. "Empty threats."

"No." Her voice rose on a hysterical note and she leaned forward, gripping the edge of my desk. "Something terrible happened on my way here to see you. I left my apartment and when I stepped off the curb to cross the street, a car suddenly started and came racing straight at me. I thought, this is it! They know I called you and they're punishing me. I'm going to be killed or maimed. I was paralyzed. I couldn't move. And then, at the very last instant, the car swerved and roared past me." Recollection drained her face, leaving it bone-white.

"Could you identify the driver?"

"I don't know; it happened so fast."

I brought her a newspaper clipping from one of my files. "Look at this picture. Does it resemble the man you saw?"

She studied it, brow crimped. "I—I'm not sure. Is it that man Floyd Oster?"

"The same. From what I know of this particular insect, he's our most logical target."

"Doesn't he know I haven't got the money, that the police are holding it as evidence?"

"He couldn't care less. He knows you have the judge's insurance."

She was on the verge of tears. "But they're not entitled to that. It's my only security."

She seemed unaware of her assets. With that superbly extravagant figure, she had all the security she would need for a long time to come. "Relax, Mrs. Bolt," I said. "It's in my hands now."

She managed a weak smile. "Would you need a retainer?"

I never refuse payment. She seemed eager to write a check, as though the transfer of money would guarantee success. After she left, I sat back and gave it some thought.

Floyd Oster, presently under indictment, was out on bail. His defense attorney, Edward Colson, was general counsel for Amalgamated Mechanics. Ordinarily, a man like Oster would never be able to afford the ticket for such high-priced legal talent. I could make a fair assumption that the union, under pressure from Ira Madden, was paying Colson's fee.

Coincidentally, Colson's office was three floors above my own, here at Rockefeller Center. I dialed his number and was told that he was at an arbitration hearing and would not be available until tomorrow. I saw no impropriety in bypassing Colson for a direct approach to Oster himself. Undoubtedly, Oster had instructions to keep his mouth zippered, but I was not interested in any dialogue with the man. I just wanted him to listen; admittedly, a quixotic approach.

The building was a converted brownstone, indistinguishable from its neighbors on Manhattan's west side. When I rang the bell, he called out guardedly for identification. Then he opened the door as far as the protective chain would allow. Floyd Oster, a carp-faced and sulfurous little brute, with a smile like a curved scimitar and just as lethal, was Ira Madden's right hand. He remembered me without pleasure from our last meeting.

"May I come in, Floyd?"

"No."

"I have something I want to say."

"Say it to my lawyer."

"If Ed Colson knew what you're up to, he'd walk away and you'd need a new attorney."

"Ed Colson works for the union. He does what he's told."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Say your piece and bug off."

"You nevér learn, do you, Floyd? Right now you're in a sling with the U.S. Attorney on a bribery charge. But that isn't enough. You're chasing after more grief, adding a count of extortion to your indictment. I'm telling you to stay away from Laura Bolt. One more threatening telephone call, another attempt at intimidation like that automobile caper this morning, and I promise you I'll blow the lid."

"You're talking Greek."

"That's a bad hand, Floyd. Throw it in. You know exactly what I mean. And I don't think you're acting on instructions from Ira Madden. With what he has stashed away, fifty grand would be peanuts: So this is your own private little operation. I'm telling you to drop it. Get off the lady's back. Because if anything happens to Mrs. Bolt, the roof will fall in."

It bothered him a lot. He called me a name and slammed the door.

So maybe he needed money. Maybe his common sense was canceled by greed. Whatever, the judge's widow was back on the phone late the next morning, agitated and close to panic. She'd had another call. The banks would be closed over the weekend, so Monday was her deadline, the voice asking her how she would like to attend my funeral just before her own, and reminding her of the automobile that almost sent her flying through the air like a rag doll.

I calmed her, broke the connection, marched out to the elevator, and rode it up three floors to Edward Colson's office. Oster's lawyer would have to read the riot act to him. Colson's secretary told me that he would be leaving for lunch in a few minutes, and without an appointment . . .

"Just tell him that Scott Jordan is here."

She looked doubtful, but spoke into her phone. In ten seconds Colson emerged, a tall, shambling pipe-smoking man with blunt features and a shock of brown hair. Edward Colson was a courtroom orator of the old school, somewhat flamboyant but tough, shrewd, and knowledgeable.

"Counselor," he said, voice resonant, both hands employed for the shake, "you promised to call me for lunch one day. Must have been a

year ago at least. Come in." He took my elbow and steered me into his private office.

He had company—a spinster-type, thin and flat, early thirties, with mousy hair and soft spaniel eyes that seemed to spend most of their time worshiping at Colson's shrine.

He introduced us. "My fiancée, Lily Madden."

"Ira Madden's daughter?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Do you know my father?"

"Not personally."

"Lily and I became engaged last week," Colson said.

She raised a hand, proudly displaying a blue-white rock about five carats in size. It caught the midday light and sparkled. No financial burden on Colson, I thought. Easily affordable, considering the annual retainer he got from Amalgamated Mechanics. Still, Lily Madden was so obviously enamored she probably would have been satisfied with a zircon from the five-and-dime.

From time to time I had seen Colson squiring a few lovelies around town. He was a connoisseur. So why settle for someone as plain as Lily Madden? Insurance, probably; Colson relished the good life, and as Ira Madden's son-in-law, his position as general counsel for the union would be secure.

"Shot of brandy?" he asked.

"No, thanks. Could I talk to you in private for a moment?"

"We have a table reserved for lunch. How long do you need?"

"Ten minutes should do it."

"Lily, please. There are magazines in the reception room."

She smiled at him, eyes lingering on his face, and stepped out.

"Marvelous girl," he said.

"All these years a bachelor, Ed. And now you're taking the plunge?"

"It's time, isn't it? I'm not getting any younger."

He settled behind his desk and folded his hands. "What's on your mind, Counselor?"

"One of your clients. Floyd Oster."

He made a face. "I take the good with the bad. As a union official, I have to go to bat for him."

"Naturally. But you must be soaking the man unmercifully."

"How do you mean?"

"Oster got his neck way out, trying to raise some heavy sugar."

"Impossible. This defense isn't costing Oster dime-one. Amalgamated Mechanics is picking up the tab."

"Then he's involved in a little private enterprise, highly illegal. Or perhaps your future father-in-law is prodding him."

Colson's smile vanished. "What are you driving at, Jordan?"

I recited for him, chapter and verse. "You're Oster's lawyer. You know the background. That fifty grand he gave Judge Bolt—"

"Correction. One adverb short. *Allegedly* gave . . ."

"Do you doubt his guilt?"

"He carries a presumption of innocence."

"An eloquent phrase, Edward. But for Oster, a mere technicality. If Judge Bolt were still alive and testifying, the government would have no problem clapping your boy into the slammer for a couple of years."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Nevertheless, somebody handed His Honor fifty grand cash money while Ira Madden was on trial for embezzling union funds. It was not a charitable donation. And who else needed favors from the judge, preferential treatment, a biased charge to the jury? Whatever, Floyd Oster is now trying to get his hands on it."

"What makes you so sure it's Oster?"

"Come off it, Ed. Everything points to the man. And the U.S. Attorney would dearly love to nail him. None of this is likely to help Ira Madden when he goes back into court."

Colson shook his head. "I can't believe Oster would be that stupid."

"If he had anything but a vacuum north of this sinuses he wouldn't be in all this trouble."

"You think he'll listen to me?"

"You're his lawyer."

"Where's my leverage?"

"He knows the value of your services. You can threaten to dump him."

"No, sir. That's exactly what I cannot do. But I'll bend the rules a little. I'll talk to him. Just remember, these union people sometimes ask my advice. They don't always take it."

"Maybe they've learned a lesson. Both Madden and Oster are facing a serious prosecution."

"Madden feels he can beat the rap."

"How? By bribing judges?"

"That was a piece of damned foolishness. I had no part in it."

"So they keep piling it on, adding extra counts to the indictment. On the next round, you're going to have one very careful jurist up there on the bench. Seems your clients are hell-bent on shooting down the record of acquittals."

Colson got to his feet. He walked over to the window and stood looking at me, his jaw set. "All right, Jordan. I'll have a session with Oster. I'll lay it out for him. I give you my solemn pledge that if—"

The buzzer stopped him. He went back to his desk and picked up the phone. "Who? Who? Yes, put him on." He listened and I saw him go tense, sudden shock in his face. "Oh, no!" he said in a hushed whisper. "When did it happen? Yes, of course, I'll come right over." He rang off and looked up, his mouth stiff with restraint. "Ira Madden is dead."

I whistled softly. "How did it happen?"

"Car accident. Madden was behind the wheel, heading north on the FDR Drive. Lost control at the Forty-second Street exit and slammed into a concrete abutment. Too damned lazy to attach his seat belt and damned near impaled on the steering wheel."

"Driving alone?"

"No. Floyd Oster was with him."

"Hm. What were his injuries?"

"Broken wrist. Seems he threw his hand up to keep his face out of the windshield." Colson shook his head. "How am I going to break this to Lily? She loved the old tyrant."

What they needed was privacy. He was brooding uncertainly at the door as I walked through it, his face half-past-six on a stopped clock. I thought I knew what ailed him. There always are dissident factions within a union, angling to take over top management. A new team might sweep out all of Ira Madden's old henchmen, including union counsel Edward Colson.

Madden was given a splendid send-off: bronze casket, a cortège of retainers one-eighth of a mile long, and floral offerings more suitable for a wedding. I attended the last rites out of curiosity but derived no pleasure from the proceedings. Funerals are a pagan ritual relished only by morticians and enemies and possibly a few heirs of the deceased.

Lily Madden, chief mourner, sole surviving relative, shoulders stooped, face hidden behind a black veil, was managing to stay upright with the help of Ed Colson's strong right arm. Floyd Oster was not one of the

pallbearers. His left wing, in a cast, was cradled by a sling around his neck, no identifiable expression on the carp face.

In unctuous tones, the presiding cleric chanted a litany of Ira Madden's sterling characteristics and accomplishments that would have astonished the deceased. The words brought convulsive sobs from Lily.

Mourners departed from graveside just before the final planting. I watched Ed Colson hand Lily into a limousine and then drop back for a brief colloquy with Floyd Oster. There was a snarl on Oster's face. Ultimately, Colson threw up his hands in frustration and joined his fiancée. Oster climbed into the following car.

When I got back to my apartment, I phoned Laura Bolt. Her answering service said she had gone away for the weekend. I thought, *Why not?* Manhattan is not unalloyed bliss during the furnace summers. I longed for a touch of respite myself. Two days fishing on a quiet mountain lake seemed like a good idea. So I packed essentials and ordered my car.

Then, heading toward the Henry Hudson Parkway, partly on impulse and partly because it was on my way, I decided to stop off for another crack at Floyd Oster.

I parked in front of the brownstone and rang his bell. No response. I kept my finger on the button and finally gave up. As I left the building, there he was, sauntering toward me, lugging a six-pack of beer. I blocked his path at the entrance. He fixed me with a cold, reptilian stare.

"Move it, Jordan. Get out of my way."

"Ah, Floyd," I said, "you don't listen. Not to me, not to your own lawyer. Stupid, greedy, bull-headed. Words can't penetrate that skull of yours, so I'll have to try something else."

"Yeah?" A twisted sneer. "Like what?"

"Like putting you behind bars. My personal project, Floyd. I'm going to bring you down. Ira Madden is no longer around to provide protection. Some new boys are going to take over the union. Colson will dump you, too. So you're all alone, Floyd. And if—"

I stopped, clued by a sudden flicker in his eyes, a slight shifting of weight. As the tip of Oster's heavy shoe shot upward, I swiveled, grabbing his ankle, and twisting his leg through a ninety-degree turn. It lifted him off the ground and when I let go, he fell heavily to the pavement, arms flailing. Oster landed on the poor broken wing and he whinnied like a horse in a burning barn.

I bent contritely to lend him a hand. He pulled away, frothing obscenities. He had the lexicon of a mule Skinner.

"Now you just leave that poor injured man alone," a high-pitched voice snapped at me from behind.

She was small and wrinkled, frumpily dressed, with flour-white hair, stern-visaged, brandishing an umbrella. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a big man like you? Attacking Mr. Oster, him wounded and helpless." Her lips were so tightly compressed they were invisible. She threatened me with the umbrella. "Get away from him. Shoo! If you don't leave this instant, I'm going to make a citizen's arrest. Felonious assault."

I repressed a smile. This feisty little specimen would barely tip the scale at eighty pounds, and I didn't for a moment doubt that she was ready to put the arm on me and hustle me down to the local precinct.

I looked down at Oster. "Sorry about your wrist, Floyd. It was unavoidable. But from here on, no more dialogue." Then I turned quickly and went to my car and drove off. I stopped thinking about Oster when I crossed the George Washington Bridge and headed north on Route 17.

It turned out to be a profitable weekend. I caught six medium-sized trout. I skinned, boned, sautéed, and consumed them with vast relish. I went to bed early and got up early and I thought how pleasant it would be to spend one whole month engaged in these wholesome endeavors. On Monday morning, I drove back to the city.

A visitor was waiting for me in the lobby of my apartment building—Detective-Sergeant Wienick, unsmiling, barrel-shaped and balding. "Have a nice weekend, Counselor?" he inquired politely.

"A reception committee from the New York Police Department," I said. "Well, Sergeant, what cooks?"

"A drive in a city-owned vehicle. The lieutenant is waiting."

He meant Lt. John Nola of Homicide. The lieutenant sat in his office, swarthy, trim, precise, abrupt to the point of courtesy, probably the best cop on the force. Although I had not been in touch with him recently, he dispensed with all amenities.

"You go away for the weekend, Counselor, how come you don't let your secretary know where you can be reached?"

"And be at the mercy of the telephone? No, sir."

"Maybe there's an emergency."

"Emergencies are for doctors, not lawyers." I lifted an eyebrow. "What's your problem, Lieutenant?"

"We both have a problem. Yours may be more serious than mine. All right, Wienick, let the lady have a look at him."

The sergeant stepped out and returned a moment later, ushering a woman through the door, the little old lady with the umbrella. She stopped short, staring at me. She pointed a quivering finger and announced in a shrill voice, "That's him! That's the man! I saw him attack poor Mr. Oster. I saw him with my own eyes." She fell back a step. "He's dangerous. Don't let him get close to me. He shouldn't be allowed on the street."

"No doubt in your mind?" Nola asked.

"I have 20-20 vision, Lieutenant. They oughta bring back capital punishment. Prison is too good for—"

Nola cut her off. "See that the lady gets home, Sergeant."

Wienick took her arm and firmly nudged her through the door. Nola sat back and shook his head sadly.

"Don't tell me," I said. "Let me guess. Something happened to Oster."

"It did, indeed."

"The works?"

"Enough to put him in cold storage down at the old morgue."

"I can't say I'm grief-stricken, Lieutenant. Society will survive the loss. When did it happen?"

"Sunday afternoon."

"While I was up in the hills, fishing."

"Proof?"

"If necessary."

"Routine, Counselor. I insist."

"Then you'll have it. Fill me in, please. Who found the body?"

"Mrs. Scrimshaw."

"Who?"

"The old lady. Holly Scrimshaw."

"You're kidding."

"That's her name, Counselor." A smile flickered, meager and brief. "She thought she heard a shot and went down to investigate. Oster's door was open. He was slumped in a chair, one bullet in his left temple; about 2:00 P.M. Mrs. Scrimshaw ran back to her room and phoned. We caught the squeal and were there in minutes. She told us about that fracas you had with Oster on Friday. She said you got into your car and she remembered the registration."

"Remarkable."

"She is, indeed. We couldn't reach you and figured you were away for the weekend. Enough. Let's bring it home. What happened between you and Oster?"

"It's a long story, Lieutenant."

"I'll make time for it. Talk."

I sighed and sat back and told him about Oster's attempt to extort money from the widow Bolt. He listened, eyes narrowed.

"Would that be the fifty thousand dollars allegedly paid to Judge Bolt for favorable rulings in the Madden embezzlement case?"

"The same."

"You're certain it was Oster?"

"Everything points to him."

"Why you? Why didn't she come to the police?"

"Because he warned her to stay away from the law; and the lady was terrified."

"So you saw Oster on Friday for the last time."

"Yes."

"You couldn't budge him and you decided to use a little muscle."

"You know better, Lieutenant. Violence is not my style. Oster ignored my first visit, and when I asked Ed Colson to intervene, Oster continued intractable. So on Friday I decided to give him one last chance."

"And then?"

"I intended to turn it over to the law."

"You're a big man, Counselor. Are you telling me that Oster tackled you with one arm in a sling?"

"Lieutenant, Floyd Oster was a savage little fiend. If his dropkick had landed I would have been out of business for weeks. Dumping him was purely defensive. He seldom lost an argument. Look what happened in that accident. It killed Madden and only fractured Oster's wrist."

Nola studied me for a long moment. Finally he reached a decision and said, "The accident did not kill Ira Madden."

I sat erect.

"What?"

"Madden was dead when his car hit the abutment. As a DOA, he was taken to the morgue. An attendant found medication in his pocket. Nitroglycerin tablets. You know what they're for?"

"Hardening of the arteries. Generally prescribed for arteriosclerosis."

"Correct. They also found an anticoagulant. Obviously Ira Madden had been a candidate for a heart attack. He was autopsied and the M.E. found a massive clot blocking one of the major heart arteries. The M.E. says it finished him off in the blink of an eyelash and that's why he lost control of the car."

"And Madden kept his condition a secret."

"Naturally. He didn't want his enemies at the union to know."

"Those vials containing his medication, was there a doctor's name on them?"

"A Dr. Lewis Bukantz."

"You questioned him?"

"He was reluctant to talk, but we got enough out of him to clear the picture. Madden had a history of hypertension, high blood pressure. He suffered his first attack a year ago. He refused hospitalization. Bukantz advised him to ask the government for a delay in bringing him to trial, claiming that stress and anxiety might exacerbate his condition."

I arched an eyebrow. "Exacerbate?"

"Nice word, no? I learned it from the doctor. It means to exaggerate or intensify the disease. Madden turned thumbs down."

"Of course. It would have required a motion by Madden's attorney, stating a reason for the application."

"So the doctor washed his hands of responsibility."

I shook my head. "Seems the law is a-little screwy on this. Cardiac failure is presumably a private matter, not affecting the public. Except they ought to revoke the patient's license to drive a car. Because if a seizure hits the man on a crowded street, he might start mowing down innocent pedestrians."

"You got a point, Counselor. And it's happened in the past." He regarded me narrowly. "How are you on history?"

"Now, there's a staggering non sequitur, if I ever heard one. What history are you talking about? Modern? Medieval? Ancient?"

"Ancient."

"How far back?"

"896 B.C."

"Nine centuries before the birth of Christ. Not my specialty. I'm a Civil War buff. Why do you ask?"

"Here. Take a look." He handed me a small square of paper with fold creases. "We found this in Oster's wallet."

I saw, written in pencil: #1—896 BC. It rang no bell. It stirred no recollection. I looked up. "Why don't you check with some historian who specializes in the era?"

"I did. Professor Bernard Buchwald at Columbia. He tried to come up with something." Nola made a helpless gesture. "But who kept records in those days? A few hieroglyphics in caves, maybe. Nothing we could use."

"You think the date is significant?"

"Counselor, that paper was in Oster's wallet. The man was murdered. Can we afford to ignore it? All right. Now, let me test you again. Here's another." He produced a second slip of paper. "Also from Oster's wallet. The name of a man. Ever heard of him?"

I studied it intently, like one of Dr. Hermann Rorschach's inkblots. It read: C H George, NAS. No periods between the initials. I dug deep, but the name triggered no response.

"He's a stranger to me," I said. "I see the handwriting on this slip of paper is different from the other."

"Correct. The date is in Oster's hand; the name was written by Ira Madden. We compared them both with known specimens."

"C. H. George. Have you checked him out?"

"He's not listed in the telephone directory, all five boroughs. Query, Counselor: Do you know of any degree or title or government agency carrying the initials NAS?"

"None I can recall. But the pension fund of Amalgamated Mechanics, the alleged source of Ira Madden's loot, was heavily invested in the stock market. Some of those securities are probably unlisted and traded over the counter. Madden was in charge. So NAS could be an abbreviation for National Association of Security Dealers."

"If C. H. George was in business, wouldn't he list his name in the telephone book?"

"Of course. But which one? Suppose he has an office in Newark or Passaic or Jersey City or Hoboken or—take it from there."

Nola looked sour. "Or maybe one of a thousand other cities. Madden would have dealt with any clown who'd kick back a piece of the commissions."

"Why not call the NASD itself and ask if C. H. George is a member?"

Nola thumped his forehead and quickly reached for the phone and barked an order.

As he hung up, the door opened and Wienick was back. "Keep your hat on," Nola snapped. "Pick up Laura Bolt and bring her in."

"Now, wait just one little minute," I said. "Why bother the lady? Can't you leave her in peace?"

"Your fault, Counselor. You tell me Oster was trying to extort money from Mrs. Bolt. Oster suddenly becomes a corpse, so we have to sweat the lady to find out if she's clean."

"Then you'll do it in my presence. I'm her lawyer."

"And you'll advise her not to talk."

"Come off it, Lieutenant. Mrs. Bolt has nothing to hide. She was out of town when it happened."

"Convenient. All interested parties manage to leave town while a murder takes place."

"Not all, Lieutenant. Just Laura Bolt and myself. Somebody apparently stayed here to do the job."

"Yeah, I know. Or maybe somebody sneaked back long enough to point a gun."

"Laura Bolt never fired a gun in her life. She couldn't hit one of the walls from inside a room."

"You know that for a fact, Counselor?"

I grinned.

"No. May I have five minutes with the lady before you put her on the grill?"

"I'd rather not."

"Lieutenant, the U.S. Supreme Court gives every accused the right to remain silent until he consults with an attorney. You've heard of privileged communications. Where's the privilege if I can't see her in private?"

"Aagh! Who the hell can argue with a lawyer? You may consult right here in my office."

"Is it bugged?"

"Do me a favor, Counselor. Kiss—"

"Don't say it, Lieutenant. It's not dignified. If—"

The buzzer signaled. He put the phone to his ear and listened, one eyebrow arching. "The man can't wait? All right, send him in." He hung up and looked at me. "Stay put. This should be interesting."

Nola's visitor was a thin, humorless, balding primate with computer eyes and a razor-slit mouth. He introduced himself in a flat, uninflected

voice and presented credentials: Mr. Harry Prime, Frauds Division, Internal Revenue Service. What he wanted was a line on Floyd Oster. He'd been told that Lieutenant Nola was in charge of the homicide investigation.

"Was Oster due for a tax audit?" Nola asked.

"Nothing like that, Lieutenant. Oster contacted my department several days ago and started preliminary negotiations. He wanted information about an informer's fee."

Nola frowned. "Informer's fee?"

"Squealer's reward," I volunteered. "A tip to the gentlemen at IRS about someone's tax evasion and the government rewards the squealer with a percentage of the recovery, if any."

Mr. Harry Prime regarded me with distaste. "I don't believe I caught your name."

"Scott Jordan."

"Yes, I've heard of you. Well, for your information, sir, we prefer not to call it a 'squealer's reward.' 'Informer's fee' would be more appropriate. An individual who assists us in tracking down money that rightfully belongs to the government is a patriot performing his civic duty."

"Mr. Prime, any time Floyd Oster performed a civic duty for patriotic reasons should be declared a national holiday."

Nola spread his hands. "What exactly do you want from me, Mr. Prime?"

"Perhaps I'd better give you a little background, Lieutenant. When Floyd Oster got in touch with us, he said that he had valuable information about a tax evader. He did not identify the man, nor supply any information about where the illegal funds could be found. He did say the sum was considerable, in excess of one million dollars. He wanted to know what percentage of the recovery he could expect. At the conclusion of our talk he made an appointment to see me later this week. Well, you know what happened. Oster was killed, foreclosing further disclosures. The Internal Revenue Service would like to know whether your investigation has turned up anything that might help us."

"Not yet. We haven't been in the picture long enough."

"Can you tell us anything about his associates?"

"The only name that comes to mind is Ira Madden. But there is nothing in the record to indicate that he would double-cross his former employer. May I make a suggestion?"

"Please do."

"Oster was under indictment by the Justice Department. They've been investigating him for months. It seems likely that the U.S. Attorney for this district would have considerably more information about the man than I do."

"He's next on my list." Prime snapped his head around to eye me with sudden recollection. "Scott Jordan . . . Weren't you supposed to represent Judge Bolt on that bribery charge for which Oster was under indictment?"

"That's right."

"Do you know anything about this matter?"

"Not at the moment," I said. "But I have a client who's being questioned about the Oster homicide, so I have a special reason for digging around. If I come up with anything involving this tax evasion, would I not be in line for an informer's fee?"

He wore a look of pain. "Each case must stand on its own merits. You are an attorney, sir. An officer of the court."

"Except that I'm not on salary. I'm just a citizen trying to perform a civic duty. I've been shelling out to the government all my life. I wouldn't mind getting some of it back. Strictly legal, of course, according to your own rules. Now, don't con me, Mr. Prime. Will I be entitled to a cut?"

He had to clear an obstruction out of his throat. He spoke with difficulty, as though any payment would be coming out of his own pocket. "Mr. Jordan, if you provide us with information that materially assists the government in making a recovery, yes, you would be entitled to a fee."

"How much?"

"I do not think you would be disappointed."

"Ten percent?"

"In that neighborhood."

Ten percent of one million was a good neighborhood. I said, "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

He produced a card. "Call me at this number." He stood and shook hands with Nola. With me, he skipped the amenities. After he left, Nola gave me a searching look. "I know that expression, Counselor. It troubles me. You're onto something."

"Only a vague notion, Lieutenant. An unleavened theory."

"Maybe I can help."

"Later, maybe. After I work it out."

He nodded in resignation, knowing it would be futile to insist. The door opened and Sgt. Wienick was back again with an outraged Laura Bolt, bitterly complaining. I silenced her with an upraised palm.

"This handsome gentleman," I said, "is Lt. John Nola. He will allow us to use his office and he assures me the room is not bugged."

Nola stifled a comment and stalked out, tugging Wienick behind him. I asked Laura Bolt many questions and was not especially charmed by any of her answers. She had driven out to Montauk, the weekend guest of friends. They had also invited another guest, male, a bachelor, hopefully suitable as a companion for Laura. A doomed pairing; ten minutes after the introduction she loathed him. Early the next morning, apologizing to her friends, she drove back to the city.

So she was right here in town when Floyd Oster had bought it.

Yes, she'd heard about his death. No, she had not been near his apartment. Her reaction? No trace of grief; in fact, some elation. She had finished the weekend watching television. No calls from anyone.

Nola is going to love this, I realized. With the Anglo-Saxon presumption of innocence, he would need more than coincidence before he could even hold her as a material witness.

Finally I opened the door and beckoned. "She's all yours, Lieutenant."

His attitude during thirty minutes of probing was one of polite skepticism. In the end, he dismissed us, still dissatisfied. I knew that within the hour he would have a crew on the job, scouring Oster's neighborhood, displaying pictures of the shapely Mrs. Bolt. I put her into a cab.

Theories need a maturation period, time to ripen; so I eschewed taxis and walked, pondering all the way. Destination: main branch of the public library, second floor, a room devoted exclusively to finance and economics. Most of the room's inhabitants were bent over long tables, intently studying stock market reports, seeking that elusive opportunity to corral the easy buck with neither sweat nor toil.

I checked out a fat manual on foreign banks and offshore tax shelters. I dug deep and long, straining my eyesight, flipping pages, and eventually felt a stir of excitement. Something had caught my attention. I ran it down, checking and cross-checking until one logical assumption followed another:

Lt. Nola and I had been hasty and arbitrary in drawing conclusions. We had been dead wrong on two counts: 896 B.C. was not a date; and C H George was not a man.

My initial lead came from Mr. Harry Prime himself, informing us that Floyd Oster had queried Internal Revenue about an informer's fee. Why would Oster do that? Simple. He knew that someone had perpetrated a tax fraud. Who? Who else but Ira Madden, suspected of squirreling away embezzled union funds in Switzerland? Oster had been close to Madden, a loyal lackey; but Madden had died, and there is no profit in being loyal to a corpse.

Now he was dead, and the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York probably felt no pain. He had enough current cases to keep him occupied well into the next millennium. Consequently, he was not sorry to wipe the slate clean on the indictments of Ira Madden for embezzlement and Floyd Oster for bribing a federal judge, consigning his files to dead storage.

Not so, Lt. John Nola; a homicide had been committed in his bailiwick. Murder is murder, even the liquidation of so rank a specimen as Floyd Oster.

The files also remained opened for Mr. Harry Prime of Internal Revenue. So long as he could see any possibility for nourishing the government's exchequer, he intended to hang right in there, proceeding against Madden's estate, if necessary. He'd learned that Ed Colson had been named in Madden's will as executor.

After leaving the library, I tried a form of mental isometrics, drawing on random fragments of memory, and I now felt that certain conclusions should be passed along to the authorities. Nola was not available, and when I called Harry Prime, he asked me to attend a conference at his office the next morning with Ed Colson and the lieutenant.

The Manhattan District Office of the IRS on Church Street is a building that never failed to make me uncomfortable. Prime sat behind his desk and fixed us each in turn with his vigilant tax-collector's eyes. "A preliminary statement," he said, "just to get the record straight. There are four men in this room. Each of us has a different goal. Lt. Nola wants to catch a murderer. I want the government to collect every penny that's coming to us from Ira Madden's estate. You, Mr. Colson, as Madden's executor, would like to preserve that estate intact. And Mr. Jordan is after a piece of the action."

"Correction," I said. "The money would be a peripheral bonus, welcome but not essential. My chief goal is to clear Laura Bolt of any suspicion of homicide."

Prime was skeptical. "But you would not refuse an informer's fee." "Would you?"

He looked startled and changed the subject. "Mr. Colson, you were Madden's defense attorney. You were also Floyd Oster's lawyer. Did you know that Floyd Oster had been in touch with my office before he died, informing us that he had information about a tax fraud involving over one million dollars?"

Colson shook his head.

"I had no knowledge of that, Mr. Prime. Floyd Oster was into many things of which I was not aware."

"Well, sir, if a tax fraud had indeed been committed, and Oster was aware of it, can you guess the perpetrator's identity?"

"I am a lawyer. I prefer facts to guesses."

"Isn't it a fact that Ira Madden had been charged with embezzling funds from the Amalgamated pension fund?"

"He had been charged, yes. An indictment is not proof. He was a far distance from being convicted."

"Only his death prevented that."

"No, sir. A lack of evidence would have accomplished the same purpose."

"Well, Mr. Colson, we at Internal Revenue are convinced that Oster was referring to Ira Madden. Would you care to comment?"

"Not especially, Mr. Prime; but I will. Supposing for the sake of argument that Ira Madden had lived, that he'd been tried and convicted; that embezzled money was located, just where would Internal Revenue fit into the picture?"

"Madden failed to pay taxes on that money."

"You're way off base, Mr. Prime. Again, conceding nothing, what taxes are you talking about? That money, if stolen from the pension fund, belongs to the union, and as general counsel for Amalgamated Mechanics, I intend to see that any recovery goes right back into the union treasury. Internal Revenue is not entitled to one red cent."

Prime sat blinking, his jaw slack. Generally, in the presence of tax officials, most citizens are apprehensive, humble, apologetic, so any change in the pattern comes as a jolt. Harry Prime was suddenly at a loss for words, but Lt. Nola had a few.

"As Floyd Oster's attorney, Mr. Colson, you must have spoken to him on numerous occasions."

"In preparation for his bribery trial, yes. I'd like to make one thing clear, Lieutenant: I think Floyd Oster was a moral leper. Ordinarily I wouldn't permit an insect like Oster through the door of my office. The only reason I took his case was because he was employed by the union and Ira Madden requested it."

"We found a slip of paper on Oster's corpse, bearing the name C. H. George. Did he ever mention anyone by that name to you?"

Colson frowned. "I have no such recollection."

"The name was written in Ira Madden's hand. Did Madden ever mention a C. H. George?"

"No, sir. Who is he?"

"We don't know. It had the letters NAS after it."

"C. H. George is not the name of a man," I said.

Sudden silence; all eyes swiveling and focusing. Nola dipped his chin and said in a very soft voice, "Would you fill that in, if you please, Counselor."

"It's an address in the Bahamas, Lieutenant. Specifically on New Providence Island."

"Keep talking."

"As written, 'C H George' is a form of speedwriting. It means Caribe House, George Street, and the NAS stands for Nassau."

"Who lives there?"

"Nobody. It's the branch office of a Swiss bank with headquarters in Zurich."

"Now how in hell did you find that out?"

"You remember you also found a number in Floyd Oster's pocket: 896 B.C. At first we thought it was a date. Then, in the light of Mr. Prime's information about Oster's inquiry, it occurred to me that it might refer to a secret numbered account in a Swiss bank. So I checked a source book at the library, and among the banks listed was one with headquarters in Zurich—Banque Credit."

Nola caught it instantly. "Banque Credit. Initials, B.C."

"Precisely. 896 B.C. The number of an account at the Banque Credit. I chased it down and discovered that the bank had a branch office in Caribe House on George Street in Nassau. That tied it. The connection was too obvious to be considered a coincidence."

"And the number one before the 896, where does that fit?"

"It fits the number-one man at Amalgamated Mechanics, Ira Madden."

"And Oster dug it up?"

"You found the evidence in his pocket."

Prime snapped, "Nobody ever mentioned this to me."

"You're hearing it now," I told him. "And it would not surprise me if that account had only recently been transferred from the Zurich headquarters to an offshore branch in the Bahamas to make it more quickly and easily accessible."

"Why didn't Madden close it out altogether?" Prime demanded. "He must have known the government recently negotiated a treaty with Switzerland regarding information about illegal funds."

"My guess is that he was preparing to do that, and would have, if a heart attack hadn't finished him first."

Nola brooded at me. "So Madden was dead. Who else had a motive to kill Oster?"

"Seems to me you were all primed to nominate Laura Bolt."

"That's past history."

"Good. Because she wasn't the only victim. Floyd Oster was also putting the squeeze on someone else."

"Who?"

I pointed: "Our lawyer friend. Mr. Edward Colson."

Colson's chair skidded back and toppled over as he came to his feet. "What the hell are you talking about, Jordan?"

"I'm talking about blackmail. Extortion. Floyd Oster may have been an insect, but his brain was working just fine. He knew what you were after. He spotted your game before anyone else and he braced you for a cut of the profits."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying. I'm saying it. Right out in front of witnesses. You were Ira Madden's personal attorney. You had drawn his will. You were the executor. You knew that he had left everything to Lily, and you knew about Madden's heart attack and that he might kick off at any time."

Colson's jaw rippled. "So?"

"So you went to work on the girl. You zeroed in. She never had a prayer. All that high-pressure, virile charm beamed at the poor, sad little pigeon. And she fell. Oh, how she fell! I saw her in your office, mesmerized and moonstruck. You planned on marrying the girl, and after that it would be a breeze conning her out of the estate. Especially that money in the Bahamas. One million tax-free dollars."

"Why in hell would I need Lily's money? I'm a successful lawyer."

"Try another hole, Colson. That one doesn't fit. You've limited yourself to one client for ten years—Amalgamated Mechanics, Madden's private fief. Now Madden is dead and when the opposition takes over you'll probably get axed. It's too late to start a new practice. So you were desperate. Everyone knows you're a big spender and couldn't stomach a change in style. So you were itching to get your hands on Madden's loot in that numbered account."

Perspiration bathed his face. "How would I know where he kept that money?"

"You knew because Madden told you—an essential step in passing the money on to his daughter. That's the drill, a fixed procedure in transferring secret accounts. The bank has been told the name of the depositor's beneficiary. When he dies, his lawyer must notify them and furnish an official death certificate, which allows them to transfer the account. In this case, to Lily Madden. But only for a short time, because ultimately you'd take control. Not a cent to Amalgamated Mechanics. And knowing all that, Oster wanted in, so he put the bite on you."

White lines framed Colson's mouth. "If he was blackmailing me, why would he go to the IRS?"

"To pressure you. So you would deal with him. That's why he had to be put on ice."

Colson flattened a hand against his chest. "Are you intimating that I killed Floyd Oster?"

"Not intimating. Accusing you outright. You knew Oster. You knew he would bleed you dry. There was no other way out. I called on the man myself. I know that he doesn't open his door for visitors. But he'd open the door for you, especially if he thought you were ready to talk business."

Colson turned away, facing Nola and Prime, arms spread wide in appeal, voice charged with sincerity.

"Something's happened to Jordan. He's gone soft between the ears. I'm a respected member of the bar. It's absurd to think I would kill a man for money."

"Money," I said. "The usual motive. In this case, one million bucks. Men have plundered and slaughtered for less. But you had still another motive, Colson. I think you were the moving force behind Oster's attempt to bribe Judge Bolt. You set it up. You've been around the courts a long

time and you knew that Judge Bolt was vulnerable. And you were terrified that if Oster ever came to trial he might break and implicate you. That would be the end; complicity, conspiracy, disbarment, disgrace, prison. How does that grab you for motive?"

A dark vein bulged in a blue diagonal over his left eye. "You haven't got a shred of evidence."

"Maybe not. But you have, Colson. You're holding it now in your sweaty right hand. Oster was killed by a bullet through the head. So the killer fired a gun. The police will perform a nitrate test to determine if any gunpowder particles were blown back into the skin of your palm. And if the test is positive, how will you explain it? Target practice in your office?"

He lifted his hand and stared at it.

"And that isn't all," I said. "I don't think you had the time or the foresight to drop your weapon off the Staten Island ferry. They know how to look. They'll find it and make a ballistics check."

He transferred his gaze to me, his tongue rimming his mouth.

"You want more, Colson? Here it is. Lt. Nola will put an army into the field, locating witnesses to prove you were in Oster's neighborhood at the critical time. That's a heavily populated area. Somebody must have seen you coming or going."

He found his voice. It was gravelly and hoarse. "I'm leaving. I don't have to stand here and listen to this ranting maniac."

As he headed for the door at an awkward trot, Nola came up fast and blocked his way. "Not so fast, Counselor. We have a little business to transact at headquarters."

Ed Colson blinked, his eyes lost. Then he doubled over and got sick, right there in the Manhattan office of the Internal Revenue Service.



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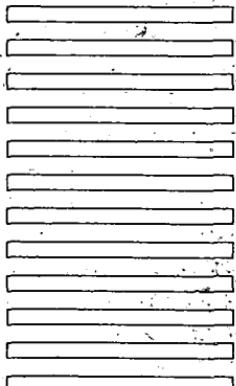


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